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PhD**

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# A Literary Critic of Socialization on Gender Stereotype in Three Children's Books by Meja Mwangi

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## Abstract

The study sought to critically analyze how gender stereotype has been portrayed in Meja Mwangi children's books; *Little White Man*, *The Boy Gift* and *Striving for the Wind*. Children's literature has focused on children's social and moral development in the children's books. However, the issue of gender stereotype is present in many children's books. This is likely to affect children's social life from the way they view children's books with gender stereotype. Objectives of this study analyzed how gender roles, character's personalities and socialization portray gender stereotype in children's books. The study analyzed children's books, specifically for ages 10 and 14. The study hoped to create awareness of how children get exposed to gender stereotype in children's books. In addition, the study anticipated in drawing the attention of the parents, to gender stereotyped children's books. This research study is therefore a useful material for reference to other researchers and readers. The study was guided by Lawrence Kohlberg's Cognitive Development Theory: The concept of Gender Constancy. The study was conducted through qualitative research design. The three story books were selected from the target population using purposive sampling technique. Then researcher used content analysis, as a method of qualitative analysis in order to analyze the selected sample. From research findings, gender stereotype is evident in the children's books by Meja Mwangi. The author portrays roles according to the genders. There are those roles that are only meant for male characters and female characters. The personality traits that are portrayed for the women and girls are weak and they depend on the male characters. While the men do not depend on the women and instead, they are brave and tough. The society highly regards the male characters as opposed to the female characters. From the conclusions made from the analysis of the research data, there are situations where the author challenges

gender stereotype. In a particular illustration, the female character is portrayed having strong and courageous personalities. Also, the male character is portrayed performing chores associated with the women. However, much needs to be done, in curbing gender stereotype in children's books. Both genders should be portrayed with equal roles, having some personalities. Social set-up should accommodate both female and male characters, in order to avoid gender stereotype portrayed in children's books. In conclusion, the study suggested recommendations to parents and teachers in using gender neutral children's books, which promote gender equality among girls and boys. Hence, the study provided sufficient and effective information in order to improve the quality of children's books and a positive impact in children's social life and moral development.

**Keywords:** *Gender Stereotype, Children's Literature, Socialization, Literary Criticism, Meja Mwangi*

## 1.0 Introduction

The children's books that are exposed to children have a social impact, because children at this time continually construct their thoughts from the material around their environment and acquiring new information with previous information (Elliker, 2005). Therefore, children literature provides different characters and situations from which the children can associate themselves with and can consider their behaviors, societal expectations and personalities (Mendoza 2001). Children's books act as a reflection of the social happenings. Therefore, the gender norms that are set by the society, influence the issue of gender stereotype in children's books (Wannamaker, 2008).

In North America, there are particular roles that are meant for boys and girls according to their gender. The children are taught these gender roles from their childhood till they later receive it. The newly born are clothed in pink if it is a girl and blue if it is a boy right from the hospital. Different gifts of toys or dolls are given to children according to a child's sex. Stories are told to different sex according to the gender. The girls will be told stories about princesses and the boys are narrated stories of dragons and fighters. This kind of gender socialization is strengthened through the literature, family or media (Chartschlaa, 2004).

African societies, should present children's books that are gender neutral in order to avoid gender biasness and give role models children can look up to. This implies that children's books can teach children on the gender roles and portrayal of characters, apart from gender stereotype. These books provide a positive perspective to the girl child and hence help her to release herself from the society norms that women occupy, mainly in African countries (Lesnik-Oberstein, 1994).

However, the issue of gender stereotype is still present in children's books. This gap, has an impact on boys and girls, especially on how they view books with gender stereotype. It is against this background that the study was undertaken to critically analyze Gender stereotype in Meja Mwangi's children's books; *Little White Man*, *The Boy Gift* and *Striving for the Wind*. These children's books were selected because of easy accessibility of the books and collection of adequate information on gender stereotype in children's books.

## 1.1 Statement of the Problem

The portrayal of gender stereotype in children's books, is an issue that is likely to affect children's social life and moral development. From the books that the children read, they associate themselves with the character's personalities, gender roles and the socially acceptable norms for each gender. Therefore, the children will often assimilate the gender

stereotype from the books that they read. This study sought to critically analyze gender stereotype in Meja Mwangi's children's books; *Little White Man*, *The Boy Gift* and *Striving for the Wind*. The study analyzed how gender roles, character's personalities and socialization portray gender stereotype in children's books.

## 2.1 Literature Review

### Socialization

Every book that a child reads, influence the kind of thoughts the child gets to perceive. Significantly, the books that the children are given to read, they have a great inspiration on their views and outlooks. Therefore, these portrayed roles force the children to govern their actions that do not outfit to their behaviors and instead, act in a manner that is taken to be "suitable". However, the information and illustrations represented in these books may endorse good and bad views about individuals, gender, job and future expectation (Aliu, 2013). For example, if a footballer is often portrayed as a male in these children's books, this may badly influence the girls and limit their interests in playing football by considering that this profession is more suitable for the boys. Hence, the authors must put into consideration eliminating stereotypes from books since the existence of stereotypical outlooks can lead to difficulties all through the youngsters' growth (Boster, 2005). Children's literature act as a mirror, reflecting the happenings of a particular society. This is the reason as to why, writers of children's books ought to be careful on the kind of message they provide.

United States research established that the children's books displayed gender stereotypes. The study shown the roles that the mothers had been assigned to be, nurturing, caring role, while the fathers had been assigned the role of provider in most of the books. These gender stereotypes can have a negative impact to the children in future. The young girls mature believing that they are only meant or restricted to be in the home-place. This can prevent them from achieving their goals, while the boys can be restricted from emotional display and hence lack their role in the society that they are from. The kind of children's books that the children are exposed to in their tender age, continuously mold the individuals we develop to be and establish the basics for the societal customs that we take into later life (Godiva, 2013). Children's literature is meant to inform children, for them to become aware of their society. In enlightening these young children, it is a wrong view to encourage gender stereotype.

In African traditional society, gender stereotypes are evident and African children's literature present recurrent gender stereotype in printed books. This contributes to females been underrepresented and dismissed in the society. They are not given power of speech to be listened to, neither are they entirely acknowledged (Dr. Colomba Kaburi, 2014). Odaga, (1985) disputes that it was essential to inscribe children's books so as to be able to categorize the type of children literature that African children were read to them in the classrooms. The reason is, among the first composed literature for children in Kenya were inscribed by European authors for children who have grown up from the western culture. This research study, focused on analyzing the portrayal of gender stereotype in connection to societal expectations. Socialization is a process that everybody goes through. Therefore, authors should be aware of the social customs and avoid representation of gender stereotype.

In East African communities, the women were restricted to stay at homes to take care of the children, prepare foodstuff, toil in the crop plantations and also, gratify their husband's sensual desires, this presented the women not only as labors but also as fragile. Hence, from this story as the girls search for foodstuff, they end up stealing it illustrating that they do not have command to take the foodstuff powerfully, like other men, or the giant. This gender stereotype view is also seen in the way women characters are presented as minor compared to

men characters (Obbo, 1980). Children can be able to relate the social happenings; with the message they get from the books they read. Hence, they can easily assimilate gender stereotype, because it is an issue that is evident in the society.

However, there were some children's books that started to be written, and these books aimed to inform readers on the Kenyan society while socializing children to the societal norms and morals. One of the children book that brought out this socialization was (Dahal, 1995) *The Orange Thieves* the book narrates about five young girls who go out to robe some oranges from a garden. They come up with a scheme, to close their eyes while they collect the fruits in the farm (Dr. Colomba Kaburi, 2014). The current research, is an observation of set standards of societal expectations concerning gender. The gender stereotypes are evident in children's books, as a result of the social happenings.

Meanwhile, as one of the two girls close their eyes one girl named Muthoni, decides not to close her eyes. However, as the girls collect the fruits, Muthoni does not find to collect ripe oranges. She then decides to go all the way back to the garden in order to collect the good ripe oranges. As she collects the fruits, she comes across Kimakia, the big giant who is the owner of the plantation. Fortunately, the giant makes a decision not to eat Muthoni, because she was too small to taste good. The giant makes a bad decision, to take Muthoni to his home for her to be his wife. When Kimakia comes home with two newly born baby boys for him to feed on them, Muthoni takes them and decides to hide them out of mercy and then gives Kimakia two huge rats for his diner. The two young boys are feed by Muthoni until they become grown up and they kill Kimakia, and then rescues Muthoni. Despite the way the three girls are portrayed to steal oranges from the farm, this can be seen as a wrong model for the young children. The gender role that is assigned to the females is that of a laborer because her duty is to search for foodstuff in order to nourish their family members in training for maternity roles. This story, replicates the social activities of a particular community from where it is borrowed from (Dr. Colomba Kaburi, 2014).

## 2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by Lawrence Kohlberg's Cognitive Development Theory (Kohlberg, 1966). The theory holds that, children acquire gender views, through the awareness that his/her gender will never change. This therefore creates a perception in a child's mind; He/she has to accept the kind of roles and behaviors associate to his/her gender. This acceptance of a child's gender to be permanent is referred to as Gender constancy.

This theory, is founded on the concept that, equality is the important feature of ethical thinking. Equality itself depends entirely on the idea effective thinking that is founded on values (Kant, 1964). Kohlberg's theory appreciates standards as a very important element of the human rights. As adapted in this study, Cognitive Development theory advocates that; when children have realized this acceptance concerning themselves, then facts on gender categorization is alleged to hold a larger significant. This is through the way the children react to gender customs, cultivate important outlooks, and direct their conducts (Carol, 2002). Therefore, Kohlberg's theory is a significant ideology in this study. It is through the understanding of stereotypical views of gender development, that a person know a child develops the gender perceptions.

## 3.0 Methodology

This study was conducted using qualitative research design. In this research study, story books for children ages ten and fourteen were used, for the researcher to assess gender stereotype in the selected children's books by Meja Mwangi. Qualitative research design, enabled the researcher to use selected children's books for in-depth analysis, for description

and explanation of how gender stereotype has been portrayed in children's books. The selected children books included three children books *Little White Man* (1990), *The Boy Gift* (2006) and *Striving for the Wind* (1992), which were sampled using the purposive sampling technique. This research study, used both primary and secondary sources for data collection. Data analysis involved description of the way in which gender stereotype has been portrayed in the selected children books, and how this relates to the objectives of the study. The researcher made a conclusion and gave recommendations, in order to address the issues of gender stereotype in children's books.

#### 4.0 Findings and Discussion

##### Socialization of Gender Stereotype in the Selected Children's Books

The idea of socialization in *The Boy Gift* brings along gender stereotype that is shown in this particular society, along with its custom and beliefs. Firstly, the boy child is highly valued in a family, as opposed to the girl child. It is evident from the analysis of this book, Tomei is concerned with getting a boy child. This is what makes him to go and visit the hospital for the first time, since having children. Tomei goes to see his son, on an early morning after his wife had given birth the previous night. It would be named Dark Warrior, Night Comer or something equally appropriate. But, for now, all he wanted was to confirm that it was a boy (Mwangi, 2006, p. 15). This illustrates that the sons, are highly regarded. Tomei had made the chief stool to remain in Tomei-Yeke's clan, because he now had a son. Therefore, he could now take the chief stool because he had finally gotten a son. Tomei would now take the leadership roles of the society.

There is unequal representation of the success, of the female characters in this society. The girls do not proceed with higher education. Their fathers do not see the importance, of taking their daughters to colleges, instead of staying at home. Old Noah who was an elderly man in the Happy Valley, is asked by the priest why he had denied her daughter permission to go Nairobi to study in the university.

"She will stay here in Happy Valley, like her mother and her grandmother." Page 48.

But there are some characters, who show a different view. In another illustration, the priest tries to show Old Noah that it's not bad for her daughter, to be different by gaining education and getting married to another community. He gives an example of a Catholic saint, sister Theresa but Old Noah disregards this example, simply because it's a woman and not a man. "She's a woman...And now you tell me that women are better than men?" (Mwangi, 2006, p. 47).

However, we get to see that the men are given opportunity to education. One of the sons of chief Jona, had gone to the university. He had been sent to school to learn trading. Not only had he learned trade, but had studied to become a doctor and a chief Government minister. Therefore, education is not meant for the female characters, but the society chooses to educate the male characters. The stereotypical views portrayed to the female characters, can be harmful to children's social life. Because the information that the children acquire at a tender age, greatly determines their way of life and what they choose to pursue.

In this particular society, the author portrays the high regard that the boy child holds in a family and a clan in general. The baby boy Gift, had long been awaited because it is due to his birth, that Tomei could now have a seat in the high council. Hence the chief stool would still remain in Tomei-Yeke's clan. The girl child is not part of the rules of holding leadership positions. Therefore, these society rules drive Tomei to go and see the witchdoctor, in order for him to get a son. Tomei sacrifices many of his livestock for the spirits to get a boy. "It had

to be a son. He had sacrificed enough chickens and goats to guarantee it. He had slaughtered roosters and brewed honey beer for the spirits” (Mwangi, 2006, p. 15).

From critical analysis of *Striving for the Wind*, the sons are much regarded and the fathers, educate them in order to boast about them in front of their male friends. Baba Pesa holds a *harambee* to take Juda to America, to further his studies. He boasts to the other male friends because his son had acquired a degree. The female characters are portrayed as weak and the society exploits them. Baba Pesa takes hold of mama Pesa by force and also impregnates Margaret. Elijah his son, also tries to take advantage of Margaret after he had given her a free ride in the pick-up from school. He throws her on the ground and she suffers from beatings as she tries to run away. Her books become scattered on the ground with dust and her dress gets torn.

Gender stereotype is evident from the social set up of *Little White Man* by Meja Mwangi. Men are the only ones who go out and fight for freedom that the whole society wants. The society portrays men, as the only ones who are able to save people against the problems that they are facing on the hands of the white people. Even as the *mau-mau* men pass messages among themselves, they use the male character. Kariuki is the one who is given the letter to take to his brother. It is evident that there is gender stereotype in the way the author has reflected the ways of the society. In addition, the men are the ones who go out to look for income. Their wives stay at home and cook for their families. The father to Kariuki, is always outside home, working for the white man. But his wife does the domestic chores but does not have an occupation to perform. The director of the school is the headmaster; whose duty is to pass strict discipline to the children. The headmaster seems only to be apprehensive about the learning of the boys. This indicates that the society is concerned with the boys getting educated. Children’s books can be way of breaking gender stereotype, despite the society norms. Children can eventually realize the negative portrayal of gender, in the society.

## 5.0 Conclusions

The study analyzed gender stereotype in the selected children’s books; *Little White Man*, *The Boy Gift* and *Striving for the Wind* by Meja Mwangi. The study found out that, socialization of girls and boys influence gender stereotype in children’s books. The way in which authors socialize boys and girls in children’s books by borrowing the society norms, also influence gender stereotype in children’s books. Children’s books were found to uphold the idea of male dominance instead of promoting the message of gender equality of both girls and boys. Children’s books should be written in a way that they include role models that girls and boys can positively identify with and imitate in the changing modern society.

## 6.0 Recommendations

Basing generalizations on the findings of this study, the researcher recommends that there is a need to educate parents and teachers to use gender neutral children’s books that promote gender equality among girls and boys. This way, people in the society will come to appreciate both genders. In addition, the authors and publishers need to be more sensitive to avoid gender stereotyping in the children’s books that they write and publish. They should publish children’s books that have character personalities that are equal for both female and male characters. Teachers should also beware not to attribute any specific roles either gender, so as not to inculcate any preconceptions in the learners (Mineshima, 2008). Representation of gender personalities by authors, should not create stereotypical views.

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