

Analyzing Gender Stereotypes in Eva Ibbotson's *Which Witch?* (1992)

Zahra Nurul Aliyyah
English Language and Literature
aliyyahzahanurul@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

Gender stereotypes are notorious for their harmful effects; yet, the stereotypes are still found and encouraged through many aspects of life, including literary works such as children's literature. This present study examines a children-targeted novel to find whether the book conforms or goes against gender stereotypes. The novel examined is written by Eva Ibbotson and titled *Which Witch?* (1992). The present study specifically analyzes the gender stereotypical traits and attributes found in the characterization of the characters. To analyze the data, Evan-Davies' (2000) and Copenhaver's (2002) lists of traits and attributes have been drawn on. The study reveals that the book seems to perpetuate and promote gender stereotypes by embedding gender stereotypical traits and attributes in the characterization of the protagonists of the novel.

Keywords: gender stereotypes, children's literature, gender stereotypical traits and attributes

INTRODUCTION

Children's literature is a powerful part of many people's childhood. As cited in Fadiman (2017) definition of children's literature in encyclopaedia Britannica, children's literature works are not only a mere entertainment for its young readers but also as a way to instruct them. This is the reason why children's literature often has values embedded in it. From moral stories clearly written at the end of the story to values hidden among the characters' actions, these values will leave a huge impact on its readers. Yet, not all of these values are positive. Gender stereotyping is one of the negative values that may be embedded in such works. Defined by Brannon (2004) as "beliefs about the psychological traits and characteristics of, as well as the activities appropriate to, men or women" (p.160), gender stereotypes have been very notorious for its various negative impacts on human life. For children, one of the impacts is a limited perspective that can affect their future career aspirations, attitudes and behaviors, and even

academic outcomes (Aina & Cameron, 2011).

One way to raise awareness of gender stereotype is through examining books for gender stereotypes presence. There has been much research studies conducted on gender stereotyping and children's literature. For example, a research on 200 popular children books by Hamilton et al. in 2006 shows that female characters are less often to appear in the books and have gender stereotyped occupations (Meganck, 2011). There is also a research on books from *Kecil-Kecil Punya Karya* Series by Soelistyarini (2013), this study reveals that more female characters have taken central roles in the books. However, their roles are still traditionally stereotyped (such as women being passive and men being active).

This present study is conducted to examine gender stereotypes in a children's literature novel titled *Which Witch?* by Eva Ibbotson. The novel is first published in 1979 and has been published many times in various countries ever since. The version

used for this research is the version published in 1992. The novel has intrigued the writer for possible gender stereotyping as the characterization of some characters did not sit too well with the writer upon reading it on the first time, especially in how the female characters were written. The novel is also chosen because according to many reviews in book club site goodreads.com and trading site amazon.com, despite its old age and less popularity at the present time compared to the past, the novel is already widely read by many adults on their childhood in many English-speaking countries. Thus, this study attempts to find whether gender stereotypes are present and how it is perceived in the *Which Witch?* novel. To the best of my knowledge, the book has never been analyzed for the presence of gender stereotype. Therefore, the gap this research is trying to fill is finding whether the characters in the book are adhering to gender stereotypes. By analyzing the characters, it can be found whether the book is promoting gender stereotypes or not.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender Stereotype and Children Literature

Gender stereotyping deals with characteristics and personalities that are rigidly believed to be appropriate for only a certain gender (Brannon, 2004). Gender is categorized into feminine and masculine and is associated with a certain sex (Bassow, 1992). That is, feminine stereotypes for female, while masculine stereotypes are for the male.

Preventing gender stereotypes from an early age is important because children develop their perspectives on everything from a very young age (Ellefsen, 2015). A study by Cejka and Eagly in 1999 (as cited in Gupta, Turban & Bhawe, 2008) reveals that absorbing gender stereotypes in early age will result in actions and thoughts that are consistent with gender stereotypes. According to Hamilton et al. in 2006, the presence of gender stereotypes in children literature will negatively affect children's development. Exposure to gender stereotypes will limit children's views on career options and influence their personality and future parental roles (as cited in Ellefsen,

2015). Also, early exposure to gender stereotypes will impact their confidence to achieve something (Campbell & Storo, 1994).

Decades of research has shown that gender stereotypes still linger on in children's books. Research on children's literature and gender stereotypes began in 1972, in which Weitzman et al. conducted a study on Caldecott Medal and Newberry award-winning books and children's books from the popular Little Golden Books series from the year 1930- 1970 (As cited in Ellefsen, 2015). The research reveals that female characters are underrepresented, with a ratio 1:5 with male characters, and their roles stereotyped (as cited in Paynter, 2011).

Gender Stereotypical Attributes and Traits

One way to analyze gender stereotype in literature is through examining traits and attributes ascribed to the characters of the story. Although there is numerous lists of gender stereotypical traits

and attributes, the ones used by this research is the list provided by Copenhaver (2002) and Evan and Davies (2000). Both provide gender stereotypical list and attributes differently. Evan and Davies (2000)'s list is separated into two categories: feminine and masculine, with eight attributes on personalities attached to each category. Evan and Davies also provide a definition of their traits. Copenhaver (2002) separated their feminine and masculine stereotypical traits list into four categories that are not limited to personality traits only: behavioral characteristic, physical appearance, communication patterns and source of powers. To complement each other, Copenhaver's categories that used in this study are physical appearance, communication patterns and source of power while Evan and Davies (2000) list are used fully.

Literary Elements

The literary elements that are analyzed in this present study are characterizations. In which there are two techniques of characterization: direct and

indirect. Direct characterization is a characterization technique in which the author or narrator performed acts that expand readers' understanding towards the character (Ream, 2014). Meanwhile, in indirect characterization, the authors show the characterizations through clear actions and dialogues or by inner thoughts, feelings and reactions towards events (Abram & Harpham, 2012) and the readers must interpret it themselves.

METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative study which is defined by Creswell (2003) as a study that involves narrative analysis instead of a survey and/or instrument measuring. By using a qualitative method, the particular contents of the narrative will be identified. The result of this identification will later be analyzed further for underlying messages that will be able to answer the research questions.

In this research, the narrative in question is *Which Witch?* a novel

by Eva Ibbotson, while the underlying message researched is regarding the presence of gender stereotypes among the characters in the book. To achieve such result, numerous close reading processes is done by the writer to analyze the characters' traits and attributes. There are four major characters of the examined book analyzed in this study: Arriman, Belladonna, Madame Olympia and Nancy-Nora Shouter, which are chosen because of their huge role in the plot development of the book.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Below are the findings found regarding the *Which Witch?* gender stereotypical traits analysis towards the four key characters. The first of two protagonists, Arriman, is a male character who is described as aggressive, risk-taker, adventurous, assertive, and self-reliant. His source of power is his occupation as the greatest dark wizard, in which he also achieved recognition for it. Lastly, his communication pattern shows that his way of communicating is aimed to build

dominance and asserts power. Arriman is also a character who is both able and unable to express tender feelings. All of his personality traits, source of power, and physical appearance belong to the list of male and masculine. Therefore, it can be concluded that Arriman is a stereotypical male.

The second character analyzed is a female protagonist named Belladonna. All of Belladonna's traits and attributes belong to Evan-Davies list of female stereotypical traits and Copenhaver's list of feminine stereotypical attributes. Belladonna has a nurturing, affectionate, passive, tender and understanding personality. Her description of physical appearance shows that she is a beauty which is also function as her source of power. Lastly, Belladonna's communication pattern shows that she is very tactful and able to express tender feelings. With the presence of all these stereotypical female and feminine traits in the characterization of Belladonna, it can be said that Belladonna is a

stereotypical female.

The third character, Madame Olympia, is a female antagonist. Her character is depicted as aggressive, argumentative, and competitive. She is also described as 'evil beauty' and pay a lot of attention to her appearance. Madame Olympia's source of power is her beauty and also her skill as an enchantress. While her communication pattern shows that her way of communicating instill dominance and places her in a higher position than others. Based on Evan-Davies's personality traits list, it can be found that Madame Olympia's personality traits belong to male stereotypical traits. While according to Copenhaver's list of attributes, Madame Olympia has a physical appearance that is feminine, a source of power that is both feminine and masculine, and a stereotypical masculine communication pattern. Therefore, it can be said that Madame Olympia is not a stereotypical female.

The last character is another female antagonist from two antagonists: Nancy and Nora

Shouter. Their characterization depicts them as argumentative and, later, affectionate characters. Their source of power is their skills and their communication pattern show that they are talkative, speaking bluntly and are using harsh language. Matched with the list, their traits and attributes show they are not stereotypical female, as their source of power and communication pattern match with masculine stereotypical attributes while their personality traits are both belong to stereotypical male and female.

After determining whether the characters have been gendering stereotyped or not, the analysis of the characters found some patterns on gender stereotyping in the novel. The first pattern is how protagonists must be gender stereotypical, while antagonists do not. From the findings above, it is found that the characters who conform to the gender stereotypes are protagonists. The characters Arriman and Belladonna are protagonists, and they are depicted as stereotypical male and

stereotypical female respectively. Meanwhile, the antagonists are depicted with gender stereotypical traits that do not conform to their sex. The second conclusion is how females who are successful in achieving their goals are those who conform to the gender stereotypical traits of a female. The successful character in the novel is Belladonna, who against all odds, winning the competition merely from her looks. The character Belladonna is a female protagonist. All of her traits found through the analysis show how she is an epitome of a stereotypical female. While the losers, Madame Olympia, and Nancy-Nora Shouter, are not of such, as their male/masculine stereotypical traits are also dominant in their characterization. The third conclusion made is the portrayal of how the character's traits that are not in accordance with their gender is considered as a disadvantage. This is shown in the portrayal of Arriman. Through the analysis, it is found that Arriman's traits are in line with a male's

stereotypical traits. Yet, there is one trait Arriman possesses that does not belong to the male stereotypes. In the communication pattern, Arriman is both capable and not capable of expressing tender feelings. However, his ability to express tender feelings is only limited to people he knows best, such as his assistants while in front of other people, he will show how controlled he is. This shows the perception that Arriman's ability to express tender feelings is regarded as undesirable and will be disadvantageous if surfacing.

In relation to today's gender stereotypes, comparison of gender stereotypes in the examined books and nowadays book can be made. Albrecht (1954) suggests, literature is a reflection of the society in which it was produced, as it often mirrors values and ethics that the society holds at the time. Therefore, it can be said that the novel is a reflection of how the society was back then. Now that time has passed and societies have gone through many changes, are the values in *Which Witch?* still

relevant?

Back in 1993, Kortenhaus and Demarest did research on 150 books, and the research revealed that despite being more involved in outdoor activities and activities that were labeled as boys only, the female characters were still described as passive. Many novels nowadays have female as central characters; however, these characters are still gender stereotyped.

This is also the case for many children literary works in Indonesia. According to Soelistyarini (2013), KKPK (Kecil- Kecil Punya Karya) books written by children aged 8-12 show that despite the huge number of female characters playing as a central role, the stereotypes linger on. Girls are still pictured as passive, and mothers still take on domestic roles. Soelistyarini also mentioned how the depiction of good girls are those who followed the stereotypes of girls as passive and 'angel-like', while the bad girls are those who are aggressive and do not adhere to the gender stereotypes. This is basically the same as how the female characters in the novel *Which*

Witch? are depicted. This shows that despite times and generations have changed since the novel *Which Witch?* was released, gender stereotyping is still prevalent.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the novel indeed perpetuates gender stereotypes through the characterizations of its characters. Protagonists Arriman is described as a stereotypical male which is aggressive, risk-taker, adventurous, assertive, and self-reliant with occupation and recognition over achievement as his source of power. Another protagonist Belladonna are ascribed stereotypical feminine traits such as nurturing, affectionate, passive, tender and understanding personality. Beauty is her source of power and her communication patterns imply that she is tactful and has tender feelings.

The antagonists are depicted as non-conforming towards the stereotype of their sexes. Madame Olympia is depicted as aggressive,

argumentative, and competitive. She is also described as an 'evil beauty'. Madame Olympia's source of power is her beauty and also her skill as an enchantress. While her communication pattern shows that her way of communicating instill dominance and places her in a higher position than others. In conclusion, Madame Olympia, a female, has personality traits that belong to male stereotypical traits. While in terms of Copenhaver's list of attributes, Madame Olympia has a feminine physical appearance and source of power. Added with the masculine source of power and communication pattern. Therefore, it can be said that Madame Olympia is not a stereotypical female.

Another antagonist is female: Nancy and Nora Shouter. They are depicted as non-stereotypical female through their argumentative character that is stereotypically male. Although later, they become affectionate, deeming them also a character with gender stereotypical traits. Their communication pattern and source of power shows that they are masculine by being talkative,

speaking bluntly and using harsh language.

There are also three patterns found on in the characterizations. Firstly, the novel characterized protagonists, or the good, as gender stereotypical and antagonists, or the evil, as non-gender stereotypical. Secondly, there are indications of disapproval towards non-gender stereotypical traits that characters possess, as those traits are considered as a weakness and disadvantage.

Following the patterns and characterizations concluded above, it can be inferred that the book implies that for a character to be acceptable, he/she must conform to the gender stereotypes. Therefore, it can be said that the book indeed promotes and perpetuates gender stereotypes.

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