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Visual Narratives and Gender Role Depictions in Storybooks Read by Children in Bangladesh

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Abstract: *Storytelling has been a part of human life throughout history. Since children's books are one of the few channels through which children are introduced to different things at an early age, it is important to consider the ideological aspects that are embedded in the books. This paper examines the way gender roles are portrayed in the books of Bangladeshi children to determine what is concealed in the images. In this study, the qualitative approach to data collection and analysis was used. To analyse the visual narratives of the storybooks, the focus was on illustrations in the selected books. The research reveals the prevalent trends of gender stereotyping through qualitatively analyzing 25 books in both Bengali and English languages targeting children between the ages of 8 and 14. In the results of the study, it was demonstrated that the children's storybooks in Bangladesh have indeed some gender-related issues, that is, patriarchy, women, beauty, and misuse of power, among others. When such issues are not properly fixed, they are bound to have long-term effects on the readers, especially children, who are the fundamental targets of such books. It is vital that parents and educators' step in when they find problematic contents in the books that their children are reading. This shows that more inclusive and balanced visual stories in children reading are necessary to foster gender equity at a tender age.*

Keywords: *Illustration, Visual Storytelling, Gender Roles, Children's Books, Bangladeshi Children's Literature*

Introduction

People all over the world have valued stories as an important part of their character and way of life since the beginning of time (Mitra, 2007). The stories people have heard and absorbed have a big impact on how they understand the world. In a child's brain, learning happens in a complicated and simultaneous way so it is not necessary to categorize it as we do in adulthood. A child's mind lacks any formalized concepts of reading or numeracy, but it is the starting point of developing a connection to learning (Bruner, 1990).

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Books provide a multi-layered learning experience to children (Breitfeld, 2021). For them, books serve as both windows and mirrors. These books enable kids to see themselves reflected in the stories they read, while also introducing them to the experiences of people they might not have encountered otherwise. Books with illustrations and images help the children to understand what they are reading. It can help them with brainstorming by analyzing the illustrations while reading the texts (Carney, 2002). Sometimes, if the text is too difficult to understand then related images with that story help them to understand the main concept. It is said that- **"**A picture is worth a thousand words"**.**

Visuals in books not only help children understand the content but also acquire social ideas such as gender and gender roles. These roles are the social expectations that tell people how they should act, talk, dress, and connect with others based on how they see themselves as gendered. These expectations are very different between groups and cultures, and they may change over time, even within the same society. Children acquire knowledge of these roles significantly through reading, particularly via picture or story books designed for their age group (Ratri, 2021).

The pictures in children's books are not just for the views; they are very important in forming how they see themselves and others. By giving male and female characters different roles, traits, and behaviors, these visual elements can support traditional gender roles (Hyde, 2023). Both the words and the illustrations in children's books shape our ideas about who is valuable and who is not, which helps boys and girls find better places to make friends in society. Books are very important because they teach children how to interact with others. The images used in the books often show what is acceptable or ideal for each gender (Rehmat, 2022).

Research Objective

The main objective of this study was to reveal the gender ideology embedded in children's books in Bangladesh. Illustrations in selected storybooks are examined to identify recurring biases and to explore how these images influence young readers' understanding of their gender identity.

The study addressed three central research questions-

1. Do Bangladeshi children's books have illustrative portrayal of gender roles?
2. Do these books play any role in children's developmental awareness of gender roles?
3. How does this affect children's perception towards gender and gender roles?

Literature Review

The formative years of a child's life are critically important for the development of identity and understanding of the social world. Children's books play a central

role in shaping early identity, social attitudes, and language development (Sipe, 2015). Repeated story patterns and pictorial cues from the books help children to interpret social roles. Allen (1993) states that stories can significantly influence the kinds of people children grow up to be. Since picture books are multimodal (text + image), both linguistic choices and visual composition contribute to how children come to understand gender (Sipe, 2015). This review synthesizes the existing literature by first examining gender representations in human characters, then explores the symbolic use of animal characters, and finally, situates these discussions within the specific, yet understudied, context of children's literature in Bangladesh. This structure reveals a persistent though changing pattern of gender stereotyping globally and highlights a significant research gap in the South Asian context, which this study aims to address.

Early studies analyzing children's storybooks showed that human characters are often represented in unequal ways. Weitzman's 1972 influential content analysis of prize-winning picture books found large underrepresentation of females in titles, central roles and illustrations, and when females did appear, they tended to be portrayed in passive, domestic or dependent roles. Later studies found that although the number of female characters in children's literature has increased over time, traditional gender stereotypes still persist in various ways - girls are often portrayed as gentle, dependent, weak, and focused on relationships, while boys are shown as active, adventurous, and independent (Turner-Bowker, 1996). These studies also document subtle linguistic bias (differential descriptors and action verbs) that compounds the visual absence or marginalization of girls. In terms of analysis, these results point to two linked processes. First, when female characters are few in number, children have limited exposure to diverse female role models. Second, qualitative stereotypes in language and story roles restrict the range of behaviors associated with each gender. As a result, even when the number of male and female characters becomes more balanced, traditional gender hierarchies can persist through the ways characters are portrayed in text and narrative pattern. Therefore, recent research emphasizes the importance of looking beyond mere character counts to examine how behaviors, emotions, and skills are represented (Tsao, 2008).

Characters in children's books are gender-stereotyped in more ways than one. For instance, anthropomorphism is a common technique in children's writing (Temple, 1993) where animals that are used in the story telling are often gender-stereotyped. This symbolic portrayal is very important because it often shows gender roles in a less concrete, and therefore possibly more subtle way. Research shows that the same patterns of male control and gender stereotypes that happen in stories about people also happen in stories with animals as the main characters. To illustrate, larger, predator species are usually assigned manly roles (strong, leader, heroic), whereas smaller or cute species are assigned feminine or passive roles

(Tsao, 2008). This implies that, as much as gender theory is expressed in images of human beings, same can be expressed in images of animals, colours and body language. The animals, which are used to symbolize each gender, are not chosen randomly as well; they are very deeply entrenched in the cultural concept of what men and women ought to be. The use of bears as male figures is predominantly because bears are stereotyped as strong, brave and aggressive. Mice however are normally employed in describing female characters since they are small, timid and easily mistaken (Tsao, 2008). The activities that these animal figures engage in also reflect gender roles of the humans of that time. This view is significant since animal characters are commonly the message through which children are educated on good conduct, societal roles, and morality. This is why the visual semiotics of animal images should be also examined as well as the textual functions.

Children's Literature in Bangladesh

In research on children's literature, most of the work has been done on Western children's literature with very limited work on children's literature in Bangladesh. There is a big gap in this area of study because the local publishing business produces a lot of books that influence the lives of millions of children. However, the little study that has been done so far shows that Bangladeshi children's media strongly mirrors the country's patriarchal social structures (Asadullah, 2018). So, it can be said that while global literature trends are rapidly changing, Bangladeshi children's literature seems to be moving slowly. An analysis of Bangladeshi school-level textbooks, for instance, reveals a clear pattern of gender bias. Males outnumber females in both texts and illustrations and are found working in a diverse spectrum of careers (i.e., doctors, engineers, scientists) whereas females are found mostly at home or in few caring careers, such as teaching, nursing etc. This supports the fact that the public sphere is the male domain whereas the private is the most dominant sphere of women. In novels, too, there are not many female main characters. These are all evidence that the publishing business have not really thought about how they portray gender (Suchana, 2024).

Gender Stereotypes

The existing literature demonstrates that the issue of male bias and gender stereotyping is widespread in the educational and literary resources that are popular in Bangladesh. According to a comparative content-analyses of school textbooks, the textual and pictorial cues of a sexist bias are evidently pro-male, where women are less represented and are subject to a more negative image (Suchana, 2024). In the same way, the qualitative assessment of Bangla primary textbooks and curriculum source material shows that female characters are given stereotypical roles at work, at home, and in relationships, and women are not shown to be prominent figures in any area. These have been found in both secular and religious curriculums and both English and Bangla medium materials (Islam, 2018).

On the same note, researchers on Bangla fairy tales and folk narratives have shown that there has been a continuity of traditional archetypes. In the well-known Bangla fairy tales, there is a clear polarization between the female characters and the male ones. Female characters are presented as the stunning, pure, and helpless maidens in need of rescue or as the evil, cunning witch or stepmother. In contrast, male characters are the ones who act; they are the heroic princes, the witty adventurers and the wise kings who propel the story. The stories which have been propagated through generations are still republished in the format of children books, therefore, imparting these old gender messages to new generations. The same is reflected in analyses of Bengali folk and fairy-tale collections (e.g. *Thakurmar Jhuli*) where female characters are typically victimized and depicted as dutiful daughters or witches, whereas the male characters are presented as rescuers, heroes or adventurers (Chakraborty, 2024).

Most Bangladeshi studies focus on textual content (presence/absence, occupational roles, linguistic forms). Although some recent works have examined visuals in English-language or primary textbooks, a systematic, semiotic analysis of illustrations in Bangladeshi children's storybooks and fairy tales - specifically how composition, colour, posture, activity and placement in the picture plane encode gender - remains limited (Chakraborty, 2024). Given the evidence that visual cues operate independently from text (e.g., animal symbolism; the visual marginalization of girls even where textual parity exists), this is a notable gap. This study therefore centers not only on character counts but on an integrated visual analysis of gender in Bangladeshi children's literature, comparing human and animal portrayals and situating findings within the local folk-tale traditions.

Theoretical Framework

Current research shows that gender stereotyping in children's books is a persistent issue in the world, and it is present in both textual and visual contents (Weitzman, 1972; Turner-Bowker, 1996; Tsao, 2008). Several studies indicate that children develop a perception of gender roles due to repeated exposure to such representations in the early years of development (Sipe, 2015; Ratri, 2021). Tsao's study (2008) further suggests that gender ideology is expressed not only by human figures, but also by animal figures, posture, spatial location, and colour. Hence, a theoretical framework that recognizes cognitive integration of gender stereotypes and focuses on both narrative and visual pathways will be useful. In order to address this gap,the current research combines semiotic analysis with character analysis or character theory.

Character Theory

The analysis of gender role in children's storybooks in Bangladesh is based on Vladimir Propp's character theory, developed in 1929. Propp was a literary critic

and a scholar who claimed characters could be defined by their spheres of action and the role they played in the progression of the story. He argued, characters have narrative functions; they provide a structure for the text (Propp, 1958). He identified seven (07) typical characters, which are:

1. The Hero - a character who seeks something
2. The Villain - who opposes the hero
3. The Heroine -acts as a reward for the hero, and is the object of the villain's plot
4. The Donor - provides the hero with a magical gift or wisdom.
5. The Dispatcher - sends the hero on their quest via message
6. The Helper - assists the hero
7. The False Hero -disrupts the hero's success by making false claims

Using this theory, children's story books can be categorized into groups based on the characteristics of the protagonists. This can help identify character's point of view and role. For instance, this will help in determining who is the hero and who is the villain in the storyline.

Semiotics Theory

In addition to character analysis, the illustrations will be examined in terms of semiotics, which is the study of signs and the processes through which meaning can be generated. A sign can be a word, image, or symbol that represents something beyond itself. While semiotics covers both linguistic and visual signs, this study focuses on the interaction of text and illustration in children's literature. The modern development of semiotics in linguistics is largely attributed to Ferdinand de Saussure, who argued that language constructs meaning rather than simply convey it (Saussure, 2011). Words function as part of a structured system of signs, and their significance arises from their relations within this system rather than from the objects they label. Building on Saussure, Roland Barthes extended semiotic analysis to images and cultural texts. He distinguished between denotation (the direct meaning of a sign) and connotation, the cultural or ideological meaning that is attached to a sign, (Barthes, 1964). Barthes (1957) came up with the concept of myth where signs have secondary meanings beyond their literal meaning; in this way, the illustrations used in children's literature are signifiers. Through a combination of Saussurean and Barthesian methodologies, semiotics offers a guideline through which the engagement between text and picture can be created to construct meaning, direct interpretation, and passing of cultural beliefs to young readers. Therefore, semiotics serves as a key theoretical foundation of the study to provide a systematic study of how pictures in children's books are sign systems that affect the process of children cognizing narratives, social norms and cultural values.

Methodology

This research uses qualitative content analysis method to find the embedded gender roles in illustrations of the Bangladeshi children's storybooks. The sample was taken by purposive sampling strategy, where 25 books on children in Bangla and English language were selected. The books were chosen for their relevance to gender representation, presence of human or animal characters, illustrative elements and suitability for the age group of 8-14 years, a critical age to develop gender perceptions. In selecting the books, emphasis was placed on their widespread popularity among children, particularly those texts most frequently read and studied by young readers in the Bangladeshi context. The main unit of analysis was the character, human or animal, and visual clues like clothing, gesture-posture, physical activities, and surroundings were considered as secondary ones. The framework focused on two dimensions: the character (gender, influence, and occupation) and the scene (ambiance, activities type, and power). Visual elements were first analyzed objectively and later explained thematically to identify underlying patterns of contextual meaning. This combined approach helped to build a systematic and contextually grounded interpretation of how gendered narratives are visually constructed in children's books.

Expert interviews were also carried out to supplement and validate the findings. Participants, whose work involves a direct interest in children's literature and gender concerns were purposely chosen. The respondent list included five (05) academic and professional experts - one publisher, one illustration artist of children's books, one children's book author, one gender specialist, and one psychologist. Qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured and in-depth interviews whereby participants were given freedom to express their views but limited to the scope and objectives of the study. Later thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was undertaken. Participants were informed about the objectives of the study and their privacy was guaranteed. Content analysis of the books and collected data from the interviews combinedly helped in enhancing the credibility and richness of the results.

Findings & Discussion

After analyzing the twenty-five children's storybooks, some common patterns were noticed in the books. These patterns might help us understand more about how illustrative portrayal of gender roles takes place in Bangladeshi children's books. The following section elaborates the findings of the study.

Visibility and Representation of Characters

- *Women's Invisibility in the Images*

In most of the books, women are almost invisible in the images, whereas male characters overwhelmingly dominate the visual landscape. Kanga is the only

female character in an ensemble of male characters (Pooh, Piglet, Eeyore, Rabbit, Owl, Tigger, Roo) in *Winnie the Pooh: Pooh Jabe School e*, as well as being subordinated to a motherly role. This can be termed as female invisibility with a clear message to children about whose stories are worthwhile. Such type of disparity often come as a result of socio-cultural practices in an unconscious way (Participant 3, personal interview, August 23, 2022).

- *Hero Must Be a Man*

Male dominance in heroic roles is widespread. Propp's character typology reveals that the role of the hero - the questing, courageous, decision-making character is almost exclusively male (Propp, 1958). Examples of the hero include Aladdin, Simba, Prince Eric and Dalim Kumar. On the other hand, female characters are generally portrayed as heroines who are to be rescued, wed, or compensated. It can be seen that leadership, boldness, and agency are intrinsically male attributes. Consequently, youngsters start to link agency and competence with masculinity (Bem, 1981).

- *Female Characters as Trophies*

Female characters are often portrayed as objects of desire-prizes for male bravery. In *Cinderella, Snow White,* and *Sleeping Beauty*, the princess becomes the reward after the hero completes a quest. Mulvey's (1975) male gaze theory explains how female characters are visually constructed for consumption, not participation. This denies female agency and depicts their worth as relational rather than individual (Mulvey, 1975). The interviewed child psychological expert warned that repeated exposure to such imagery teaches children that women are meant to be chosen, not to choose (Participant 5, personal interview, August 23, 2022).

Power Dynamics

- *Power of Choice as a Male Privilege*

A recurring pattern is the depiction of fathers or male guardians making major life decisions for girls, particularly regarding marriage. In several books, marriage alliances are portrayed as political or economic arrangements made without the girl's consent. Women have persistently been deprived of agency in relation to their lives and matrimonial decisions as found in *Pocahontas, Sleeping Beauty,* and *Kalabati Rajkannya*. Male supremacy over women was a constant pattern, with fathers, lords, and monarchs determining the destiny of female characters. In *Pocahontas*, the heroine is compelled by her father to wed a tribesman for political unification. In *Kalabati Rajkannya*, the princess's tragic statement, "Earlier I belonged to my parents. Now, I'm yours," clearly positions her as an object handed from father to husband. This absence of agency prepares the children to perceive patriarchal authority as inherent. The gender expert observed that such representations may cause youngsters to absorb and emulate these standards in social relationships (Participant 4, personal interview, August 23,2022).



Figure 1: The male ruler in *Kalabati Rajkannya* (Source: Majumder, 2016, p. 2)

➢ *Domination as a Normative Male Role*

In images, the male dominance is portrayed as the order of things: males take decisions, give orders, and occupy leading roles, and women follow, obey, and serve them. This normalizing makes up general cultural discourse of patriarchy and the visual reinforcement of gender order. The study revealed a very strong power imbalance. Men are always depicted as kings, heads, fathers, and rulers but women are brought out as nurturing beings and servants. Posture, positioning, body language, and other visual cues confer power upon men (Ridgeway, 2011). Children take into their minds how society views them using this representation to create their identity and self-esteem. It is a direct imitation of a patriarchal society with children (Cooley, 1902).

Stereotyping Characteristics and Behavioral Patterns

➢ *Emotional and Behavioral Expectations*

Women are drawn as sensitive, emotional and vulnerable and men are depicted as physically strong, stoic and emotionally closed. The psychological expert pointed out the danger of such a belief and asserted that teaching boys that they are incapable of crying can lead to suppressed feelings and severe psychological problems (Participant 5, personal interview, August 23, 2022). Women are continuously displayed as docile, nurturing, obedient, and submissive as males are described as aggressive, ambitious, charismatic and risk-taking. These coded behaviors facilitate traditional socialization. This supports the gendered social organization, in which labor, behavior, and identity are determined by gender (Ridgeway, 2011).

➢ *Femme Fatale Trope and Villainous Femininity*

Women who are not the heroines, such as stepmothers, queens or witches are depicted with dark features, harsh expressions, or black clothes, which depict them as jealous, conspiratorial or wicked. It is characteristic of the fairy-tale tradition to demonize female power with the trope of an evil woman. The female villains are a widespread archetype; these women are usually depicted as jealous, plotting, andpower hungry. This is the case with the evil queens in *Snow White (Tushar konnya ebong saat bamon)*, *Saat Bhai Champa* and the stepmother in *Sukhu ar Dukhu*. Such depictions identify negative personality traits as feminine and vilify women. Children who absorb such images might start feeling as the duplicity of women and that the relationships between them are full of rivalry and jealousy (Cooley, 1902).



Figure 2: Image of evil stepmother in *Snow White* (Source: Azam, 2019, p. 3)

Division of Labor, and Social Expectations

➢ *Domesticity as Female Destiny*

Throughout the data, examples of women are dominated by those working in the home by cooking, cleaning, and looking after people. The visual content is very sharp in outlining the spheres of activity. Males are depicted as people in the open,

who are authoritative or bold: fighting (*The Lion King*), hunting game (*Kalabati Rajkannya*) or ruling over countries. Women are always presented inside the home in intimate levels: female characters in *Cinderella, Snow White* and *Sonar Kathi Rupar Kathi* are shown to be busy cleaning and cooking (as shown in Figures 3 and 4); in *Meena Cartoon*, even though Meena insists on going to school, she is simultaneously shown serving her younger sister and performing the traditional household chores, but not her brother, Raju. This division implicitly teaches children that there are certain types of settings and activities to be performed by female gender.

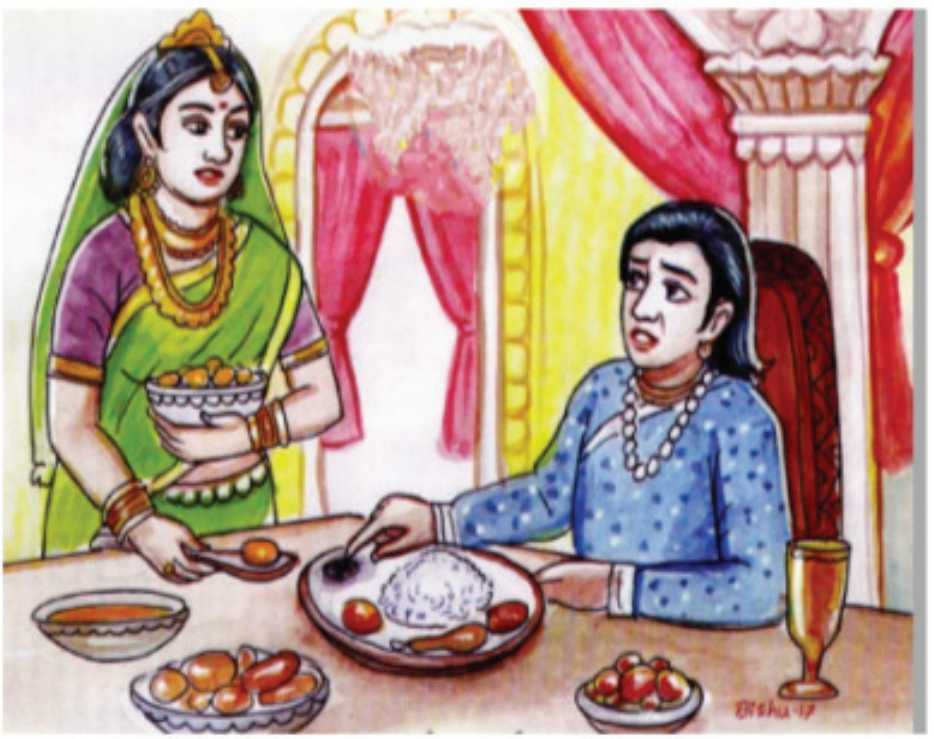


Figure 3: Female figure serving food from *Sonar Kathi Rupar Kathi* (Source: Majumder, 2017, p. 3)

It is clear that there is a separation of labour: males engage in activities outside the house, whereas females are confined in the house as portrayed in *Snow White, Cinderella* and the *Meena Cartoon*. This strong dichotomy is in line with the idea of biased social organization, where work is allocated on potential gender abilities (Ridgeway, 2011). This includes behavioral patterns, which portray women as subservient, maternal, and too emotional, and the males as dominating, self-confident, and reserved. This separation teaches children that certain occupations and traits are either male and female. The gender expert emphasized the fact that

it can lead to youngsters making a mistake by categorizing basic life skills like cooking as the role of a woman (Participant 4, personal interview, August 23, 2022). The psychologist warned that emotional inhibition placed on men (men cannot cry) can lead to serious psychological issues, such as depression, because they are taught to suppress their feelings (Participant 5, personal interview, August 232022).



Figure 4: Women doing domestic chores in *Shukhu and Dukhu* (Source:Majumder, 2012, p. 3)

➢ *Social Status and Financial Agency*

The financial agency and social rank of male and female characters in the storybooks differs significantly. Men have often been depicted as heads, with economic control, and publicity, whereas women have been the ones that stay at home, take care, or are needy. Exemplary material also links financial power to masculinity. Male characters are often portrayed as wearing suits and holding briefcases, riding motorcycles, or working in the formal industry thus having connotations of being wealthy, powerful, and professional. Women characters, on the contrary, are portrayed in sarees or salwar kameez when they are performing household duties like cooking, (as shown in Figures 4 and 5) washing, helping

children with their homework or buying goods as in Figure 3. These visual images suggest that women are confined to consumption orientated spaces, whereas men are in the production and financial decision-making spaces (Suchana, 2024).



Figure 5: Cinderella sweeping the floor (Source: Ahmed, 2009, p. 3)

➢ *The 'Happily Ever After' and Reproductive Mandate*

The narrative arc often concludes that a woman's ultimate goal is to find a husband, the "happily ever after" endings. Furthermore, a woman's worth is frequently tied to her ability to produce a male heir, as brutally depicted in *Saat Bhai Champa* and *Kiranmala*, where queens are banished for failing to bear sons. The psychologist noted that the 'happily ever after" trope can create unrealistic expectations about relationships and marriage (Participant 5, personal interview, August 23, 2022). The gender expert highlighted that the obsession with a male heir perpetuates the notion of women as reproductive vessels whose social value is contingent on producing male children, a core tenet of a patrilineal society (Participant 4, personal interview, August 23, 2022).

Aesthetic and Symbolic Codes

➢ *Colour Coding*

According to gender schema theory, regular exposure to color-coded representations serves as a cognitive signal which allows children to identify activities, behaviors, and appearances as appropriate for a particular gender (Bem, 1981). The illustrations analyzed reveal a consistent use of gendered colour symbolism. Girls are consistently dressed in pink, red, or blue codes associated with beauty and

femininity, while boys wear grey, black, or white, symbolizing strength or heroism. Such color stereotypes shape visual gender identity early in childhood (Participant 2, personal interview, August 23, 2022). A rigid color palette reinforces gender binary. Female characters like Cinderella, Rapunzel, and the princess in *Kalabati Rajkannya* are almost universally adorned in «girly» colors like pink, red, and pastels. Male characters, such as Prince Eric (*Motsho Konna*) and the Beast (*Shundori O Kodakar*), are clothed in masculine blues, blacks, and browns. This semiotic system teaches children to associate specific colors with specific genders, potentially stigmatizing deviation.

➢ *The Cult of Beauty and the "Male Gaze"*

Female characters are frequently illustrated in visually appealing or revealing attire, while male characters are depicted in practical, heroic clothing. This shows that children's books are involved in the cultural production of the male gaze. The value of the female is always related to physical beauty. Heroines are all described as fair skinned, slender and with long hair (e.g., Aurora, Ariel, Jasmine). On the other hand, female villains such as Ursula (*Motsho Konna*) and the step-sisters in *Cinderella* are presented as ugly as in Figure 6. This results in an imaginary dichotomy of beauty as good and ugly as evil. According to the illustrator of children's books, ugly women just accept the fact that they may be the evil ones (Participant 3, personal interview, August 23, 2022). This is in line with the male gaze concept in which the female characters are created with the female characters being created to be looked at, and judged, more than to underpin the plot. This socializes the children to the value that is attached to physical appearance. This may develop unhealthy obsessions over appearance and deep-rooted insecurities in children who fail to see themselves represented in these idolized photographs (Participant 4, personal interview, August 23, 2022).



Figure 6: Evil female from Image from *Dalim Kumar* (Source: Majumder, 2016, p. 3)

Stereotypes in the Animal World

Animals in children's books are often symbolically used as representations of human character, values and social status. Though these images might seem to be neutral or fantasy-driven, on a closer look it becomes clear that animals have gendered, behavioral and social stereotypes reflecting societal norms and expectations. In the selected storybooks, animals were used to consolidate social ideas of masculinity, femininity, power, obedience, leadership and emotionality. A consistent pattern is that animals functioning as protagonists, leaders, or public agents are overwhelmingly coded male. In several books the entire animal world is presented as male-dominated: for instance, the *Winnie-the-Pooh* illustrations show Kanga as the lone explicitly female animal and strictly defined by motherhood, while most other named animals are represented as male and occupy the action roles (see figure 7). The *Lion King* text similarly naturalizes male leadership: successive rulers of Pride Rock - Mufasa, Scar, and Simba- are all male, while lionesses, though hunters in nature, are visually positioned as dependent and secondary to male authority in the narrative frames analyzed. The framing reinforces patriarchal leadership mapped onto male animals.



Figure 7: *Pooh Jabe Schoolay* (Source: Zoofeld, 2021, p. 3)

Disrupting the Mold: Emergence of Progressive Representations

Although the number of stereotypes was significant, the analysis showed that there was a particular group of books with female characters who do not follow the conventions of traditional male and female gender roles. Such exceptions are essential since they suggest an opportunity of transformation within the genre. Characters such as Mulan, Kiranmala, and Moana do not fit into the passive heroine cult. They go out and have adventures, and they display physical skills and leadership. Kiranmala of *Thakurmar Jhuli* is an active character who goes to the mystical Maya Pahar to save her brothers, illustrating a courage and problem-solving technique that is normally the prerogative of male heroes. By making the love between sisters the saving element of the story, *Frozen* (*Elsa Annar Tushar Avijaan*) twists the traditional motif of true love kiss, and the storyline is suddenly relieved of any cliches of the love-at-first-sight, soul mate, or blindly falling in love. The character development of Elsa is the story of learning to control power and not focused on a prince. Similarly, in *Moana'r Avijaan*, there is no romance story, and the character embarks on a journey of self-discovery, showing courage and leadership as can be seen from Figure 8. Such progressive depictions are mirrors and windows for children, providing them with different gender roles. A noteworthy fact is however that even in certain progressive narratives such as *Mulan* success depends on the heroine initially developing masculine qualities, which means that the deep-rooted patriarchal order has not been shattered yet.



Figure 8: Cover illustration of *Moana'r Avijaan* (Source:Malakar, 2020)

Implications

The effect of these portrayals can be explained using Gender Schema Theory (Bem, 1981). Viewing boys as active, problem solvers, and heroic; girls as domestic, personal grooming or passive observers influences the internalized meaning of what is considered appropriate gender behavior in children. The Character Theory presented by Propp can be used as the effective means to analyze illustrative representation of gender roles in the storybooks. Mapping the visual representation of characters onto the framework by Propp, the study sheds light on the narrative roles attributed to both the male and female characters, as well as the reinforcement of stereotypical gender roles in the visual message as this sets the perception of the young readers of the social expectations at a very tender age (Propp, 1958). These depictions can reinforce the normative role of the male and restrain the agency of women in the minds of children (Participant 4, personal interview, August 23, 2022).

By using the Semiotic theory to analyze storybooks of Bangladeshi children, it is possible to analyze the issue of gender roles as a message better. Illustrations in these books serve a sign system whereby the illustration of characters, their behavior, dressing and spatial placement give both denotative and connotative meanings (Barthes, 1964). As an example, male characters can be depicted in active positions, in the center or high position, this can refer to their significance in the narrative, but the connotation can be conformity to a strong, agentic, and leader of others. On the contrary, female characters are often portrayed in passive or domestic conditions indicating their caregiving roles and supporting traditional gender values. The analysis of these visual codes based on a semiotic approach shows that images, as well as the textual discourse, pass on cultural expectations of gender to young readers.

The patterns are supported by the qualitative evidence of interviews with the experts. According to the child psychologist and the gender observer, children exposed to such images will tend to adopt patriarchal socialization principles and perceive male dominance and female passivity as normal (Participants 3 & 4, personal interview, August 23, 2022). Sexualizing female characters and prioritizing physical attractiveness also pose the dangers of creating body image obsession and insecurity, and the imposition of emotional restraint on boys will lead to future mental health issues (Participant 1, personal interview, August 23, 2022). Moreover, the cultural priorities that focus on the boy child as well as on the reproductive worth of women, particularly in the folktales and fairytales, strengthens existing hierarchies in society.

Although some books defied traditions, with active heroines (e.g., Mulan, Moana, Kiranmala), subversion of romantic cliches (e.g., *Frozen)*, or even stories where no male approval is necessary (e.g., *Moana'r Avijaan*), gender bias does

exist. It is not enough as a number of books still perpetuate patriarchal views (Participant 2, personal interview, August 23, 2022). The overall impact, as it is manifested in visual and narrational terms, is a reinforcement of gendered expectations that create a developmental perception of social roles in children.

The findings of this study indicate that gender roles are consistently represented in both narratives and visual illustrations in Bangladeshi children's storybooks. These portrayals have a significant influence on children's developmental awareness, shaping their understanding of social roles and reinforcing existing societal hierarchies and expectations (Participant 4&5, personal interview, August 23, 2022). As a result, continuous exposure to such stories and images may affect children's behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions of themselves and others, potentially perpetuating patriarchal norms across generations.

Conclusion

Finally, the results indicate that much of the literature about the Bangladeshi children's literature acts as a conduit for old-fashioned gender ideologies. The representations are not accidental but are organized, repetitive and thoroughly integrated into the story and visual text of the books (Participant 2, personal interview, 2022). Such depictions are reflected in larger social conventions across South Asia, in which patriarchal ideals remain an influence on the perception of how males and females should act (UNICEF, 2022). Although progressive counter-narratives are being published, they remain few and are exceptional. Such examples, despite being limited in number, point to possible directions of reconsidering gender representation in children's books, in line with the feminist criticism that demands multi-dimensional and empowered imaginations of girls.

Stories remain one of the very best ways to teach children about cultural beliefs, values and traditions. Pictures do have an influence on how young readers construct their idea of gender identity and social roles. This research demonstrated that, in some books, progress was achieved, but most of the children's books are still narrating hegemonic patriarchy through image representation. The continuation of these gender norms has far-reaching implications on the way children internalize their role in society. It is important to parents, educators, writers, artists, and publishers to recognize and solve these challenges. Promoting gender-sensitive material in children's books can help teach future generations to think more fairly. Ensuring equitable and fair representation of diverse individuals in children's literature is not merely an artistic decision; it is a societal obligation. Teaching children critical reading from a young age can give them the tools to question and fight against social norms, both on and off the page.

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