

Image of Women in Children's Textbooks

A Content Analysis

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*I*nterest in the concepts of masculinity and femininity, which was an outgrowth of the women's movement, has focused on sex role stereotypes and the potential adverse effect they have on personality development. It is well documented that sex role definitions of a society are learned through the process of socialization.

According to the social learning theory, sex-typed behavior is mostly acquired through 'observational learning' or 'identification'. Mischel (1970: 29) reports that "observational learning behavior may result from watching what others (models) do, or from attending to symbols such as words and pictures." Mischel goes on to say: "Undoubtedly, T.V., movies, books, stories and other symbolic media play an important part in transmission of information about stereotyped behavior ..." (1970: 45).

Based on the assumption that books are influential in introducing models to children, it becomes necessary to familiarize ourselves with the type of models that are being advocated in their story books through the symbols of words and illustrations.

Methodology

The present study examines the image of women and the sex roles attributed to them in Arabic children's story books. The sample consists of 100 books, written in Arabic for children between 3-14 years of age and printed between 1977 and 1993. The authors are of both sexes and from different

Arab countries. The general themes include everyday activities, nature and fiction.

The analytical framework was designed to include the following areas: female sex roles, identity, sex role traits and functions. All these conceptual terms were defined and data were exposed to

quantitative and qualitative analysis. In this presentation, we will restrict our discussion to the written word only.

Women's Roles

The majority of the roles given to the female characters in children's story books seem to converge on the nurturing and dependent qualities of women in the family. Table 1 shows the frequency of occurrence of each of the roles, namely, mother, wife, little girl (age = less than 14), young girl (age = 14 or more), princess, working woman, witch, and others including sister, grandmother, aunt, neighbor, etc. The woman as **mother** appeared in 55 books or 55 times followed by the **little girl** which occurred 38 times. It would seem that both roles reinforce the nurturance and obedience in female children connoting these qualities with goodness, and purity.

Gender related roles in children's story books tend to promote female dependency on the male through a high recurrence of the roles wife and princess. In our sample, the role of **princess** came to pass 31 times and that of **wife** 28 times. The princess is portrayed awaiting her prince in shining armor and the wife attending to her husband's needs with devotion.

The next category of roles was that of the

Table 1

Female Sex Roles in Arabic Children's Story Books
(n = frequency of occurrence in 100 books)

Mother	Little Girl (less than 14)	Princess	Wife	Young Girl (14 & more)	Working Woman	Witch	Other
55	38	31	28	25	16	12	29

young girl, which appeared 25 times. One might notice that the frequency of occurrence of this role and its importance in the process of child development follows that of already established and formed roles in society like those of the mother, the little girl, the princess and the wife.

The **working woman** appeared sixteen times. The **evil witch** was almost as frequently mentioned, i.e. 12 times and a variety of other roles like **sister, grandmother, aunt, neighbor**, etc., surfaced 29 times.

Identity

Women's identity as revealed by the character's name, age and physical qualities appears in Table 2. The mother is not given an individual identity, but appears as a symbol and is mostly identified by her role as a mother, i.e. in 66.7 percent of the cases. Her physical characteristics are rarely noted, 13.3 percent. In less frequent cases, 11.7 percent, she is introduced by her personal name or by her eldest son's name, 8.3 percent, i.e. the mother of Karim. Her age is largely ignored and left out. This practice is deemed necessary to protect her modesty and family honor, which are important variables in determining family status in traditional Arab culture. The same pattern of identification applies to the presentation

of the wife's identity (see Table 2).

Little girls are identified most of the time by their personal names having a 57.8 percent rate of occurrence. Their age and physical attributes are also discussed in detail. Thus, there are fewer restraints in talking about little girls than mothers since they do not represent a threat to family honor.

The **princess**, being a fairy tale character, is generally identified by her physical characteristics, notably those of beauty, charm and purity. Thus, the physical traits of the princess are detailed in 40 percent of the cases where she appears in the story. Whereas, the working woman largely identified by her active status in 72.7 percent of the relevant stories. So is the witch in 55 percent of the cases, when her character was included in the story. Sixty five percent of the other characters are mostly identified by their sex roles.

Sex Role Traits

Stereotypic traits were also apparent in the stories. Mothers and wives are represented as tender, protective, loving, caring, kind, affectionate, self-sacrificing, hard-working and good housewives. In the traditional code of "modesty", Hilal (1971) and Chamoun (1967, 1974) have stated that women are expected to be

"self-denying" and their femininity is synonymous with self effacement. This attitude is changing but supporting data are lacking.

Little girls and young girls are described as obedient, helpful, quiet, well-mannered, shy, polite, passive, sensitive, and caring. **Working women** are depicted as dependent on male professionals in the same occupational categories.

Princesses are always beautiful. They are passive and obedient and accept the husbands chosen for them by their fathers. However, suitors have to pass tests and engage in superhuman feats before they are granted the honor of marrying the princess. **Witches** are portrayed as evil, hateful, bad and harmful.

Female Functions in Arabic Story books

The majority of functions are traditionally expected and accepted. These are functions that endorse the duties of a **mother** such as child rearing or that of the wife such as housekeeping and cooking, or the obedient daughter learning her duties from her mother, or the **working women** who are engaged in traditional professions, which are an extension of their household chores.

For the sake of further clarity, we differentiated

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Chamoun, M. 1967. "Problemes De La Famille au Liban." **Travaux et Jours**. 25: 13-40.

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Hilal, J. 1971. "The Management of Male Dominance in Traditional Arab Culture: A Tentative Model." **Civilization**. 21(1): 85-95.

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between traditional domestic functions and traditional occupational functions. It was noticed that traditional domestic functions were more prevalent than the traditional occupational functions in our stories. Thus, more than 75 percent of the functions assigned to the characters of **mother, wife, and young girl** are traditional domestic functions as if to emphasize the importance of domestic skills for the female in society. Traditional occupational functions were more relevant to the roles of **little girl**, i.e. being a student and working woman amounting to more than 50 percent of attributed function, such as **teacher, nurse, hostess, dressmaker**. The princess and witch, being fictional characters were not heavily engaged in domestic functions.

The most frequent functions assigned to mothers were having babies, feeding, and raising children. What is utterly amazing is their super-ability to skillfully prepare a meal immediately when their husbands come home with unannounced guests. Another frequent function that mothers perform is housekeeping. Child care is also considered one of the mother's natural duties. The little girl takes care of younger siblings at home and assists her mother in cooking, housekeeping and purchasing things. However, her main function is that of a student. There are other tasks that keep her busy, but they are not identified in our sample of stories.

Table 2

Female Image in Arabic Story Book Illustrations (n = frequency of occurrence in 100 books)

	N	%
Does not Apply Regularly	259	41.
Exclusion	46	7.3
Under-representation	27	4.3
Females in Passive Situations	81	12.8
Performing Traditional Domestic Functions	108	17.1
Performing Non-Traditional Domestic Functions	6	.9
Performing Traditional Occupational Functions	60	9.5
Performing Non-Traditional Occupational Functions	37	5.8
Other	8	1.3
Total	632	100.0

Princesses have no other function but to sleep, look through the window or walk in the garden of the castle.

It was interesting to note the small percentage of women engaging in non-traditional functions. In the last decade, the impact of war and the economic condition has been and is the main incentive for women to seek employment. Nevertheless, this does not appear in the story books reviewed. The danger here lies in reinforcing the traditional image portrayed in the models.

Illustrations

Female images are largely absent in 41 percent of the illustrations in Arabic story books. When they appear, the females are shown performing domestic functions, i.e. 17.1 percent of the time. Females appear in passive situations in 12.8 percent of the illustrations.

Conclusion

The results from the above survey indicate that women in the Arab world and especially in Lebanon are actively involved in

many areas of education and work. They attend universities, work as directors, artists, writers, journalists, doctors, lawyers, judges, government officials and others. What we read in story books is not the real image of today's woman. It is the traditional stereotyped role that has been attributed and assigned to women for a long time.

Restricting women's activities to domestic functions reflects the low status assigned to them. Other indices of their status include their exclusion from intellectual endeavors, the labor market and decision-making positions. The working woman is also restricted to traditional domestic and occupational roles of housekeeping, dressmaking, agricultural work and teaching.

Since books are vehicles for learning, they should be used to expand the horizons of children rather than confine their imagination to prescribed roles and role-definitions. So, a new outlook is needed to eliminate stereotypes and to replace them with more realistic models of women in the environment.