

Gender Identity in Roald Dahl's Children's Novels

R.Adhithya

Research Scholar
and

Dr.N.Latha

Assistant Professor of English,
A.V.VM Sri Pushpam College of Arts and Science,
Poondi.

Gender identity is one's personal experience of one's own gender. All societies have a set of gender categories that can serve as the basis of the formation of a person's social identity in relation to other members of society. Roald Dahl was the world famous story teller of 20th century and also the beloved author of children's books. Roald Dahl's books for children ignite the imaginations of young and old alike, creating spectacular and wondrous worlds filled with simultaneous delight and terror, excitement and dread, as only the most profound tales and novels can. In the fabulous imaginary worlds Dahl creates children often interact with fantasy. Dahl's stories often become the most philosophical. Malicious in Dahl's book is not gender specific but exposed by the commanding adult characters.

. One can define gender identity as a person's sense of self as a female or male (Zucker & Bradley, 1995). In this way, gender identity serves as a social identity. Social identity theory posits that when one identifies with a social category, such as with girls or boys, one can relate to others in that social category. That is, even without direct contact with others in that social category, people can identify with the group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Roald Dahl was a famous British novelist, short story writer, poet, screenwriter, and also served as a fighter pilot in the Royal Air Force during World War II. He has been referred to as "one of the greatest storytellers for children of the 20th century", writing almost 50 books in his career, along with many more screenplays, poems and short stories.

The author spent most of his childhood living in Wales with his mother, three sisters, and nanny after the death of his father when he was only three years old. As he was grown up in a house full of women, he was a supporter of female gender which has been Dahl's original approach to the modern fairy tale. Dahl evidences that girls can fulfil their roles as heroines like boys are placed in the role of heroes in most of the fairy tales. For example the protagonist of the novel Matilda is an audacious and dynamic girl. She outfoxes just as well her parents by going to the library herself because they refuse to buy her any books. She stands up against the petrifying and authoritative Miss Trunchbull accompanied by her witty friends, in a manner that only boys would in more traditional literature.

Most of the Dahl's protagonists are male. We can relate this fact that Dahl was a male himself. In stopping and opposing villain from causing harm to other people Dahl's heroines are not afraid. They are very strong and independent characters. Usually in fairy tales the heroines are portrayed as the passive and submissive ones. But Dahl's female protagonists are not the passive and submissive females and there are also female villains such as Trunchbull, the headmaster and witches. They are depicted as ugly, terrifying, highly commanding women. In Dahl's novels malevolent is located in the powerful adult figure but gender is not always specific.

There is a female dominated world in *Matilda* (i.e) both the protagonist and the antagonist is female. Her parents Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood neither care Matilda nor pay attention to her. They don't think anything good of her.

"The parents looked upon Matilda in particular as nothing more than a scab. A scab is something you have to put up with until the time comes when you can pick it off and flick away. Mr and Mrs Wormwood looked forward enormously to the time when they could pick their little daughter off and flick her away, preferably into the next country or even further than that".(M4)

They think her like a scab and want to throw away her out of the family very eagerly. This is due to her gender. Matilda's parents think of her as a good for nothing girl and do not recognize her special gifts as well.

"Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood were both so gormlessly and so wrapped up in their own silly little lives that they failed to notice anything unusual about their daughter. By the age of one and a half her speech was perfect and she knew as many words as most grown-ups. The parents, instead of applauding her, called her a noisy chatterbox and told her sharply that small girls should be seen not heard".(M5)

Her father's words "that girls should be seen not heard" shows his attitude towards gender stereotypes. Matilda's father degrades her by various sexist statements Mr. Wormwood hates Matilda and disapproves her intellectual powers and her prodigy. Instead he favours his less gifted son.

"You couldn't" the father said. "You're too stupid. But I don't mind telling young Mike here about it seeing he'll be joining in the business someday". (M16)

His speech and attitude towards Matilda was not good. Mr. Wormwood completely disregarded his daughter. Even Miss Trunchbull hates girls either. She too makes the sexist statements.

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"I have discovered, Miss Honey, during my long career as a teacher that a bad girl is a far more dangerous creature than a bad boy. Nasty dirty things, little girls are. Glad I never was one".(M80)

The patterns of gender which can be associated with fairy tales are carried by the adult female characters in *Matilda*. Miss Trunchbull has a ugly appearance. She is evil working woman who is active and evil "her face I'm afraid, was neither a thing of beauty nor a joy forever".(77) Trunchbull throw Amanda away "the Trunchbull let go of the pigtails and Amanda went sailing like a rocket right over the wire fence of the playground and high up into the sky".(109) Mrs Wormwood is a self-absorbed and useless mother. Miss Honey is painstaking to be dynamic woman. She is considered as an inert when she fails to take steps to change her own situation. Finally Matilda who is a brave one does everything for her. Matilda is a robust female. Though she is a child she is independent and dynamic.

One of the most heavenly criticized sexist books is Roald Dahl's *The Witches*. There an implied connection between malicious and gender in this book. Dahl states that "A witch is always a woman. I do not wish to speak badly about women. There is no such thing as a male witch".(W3) There are no feminine features in Dahl's witches. They are always bald and there is no finger nails instead they had claws like animals. The statement that witches are not human is mentioned in the text clearly, "They look like women. They talk like women. And they are able to act like women. But in actual fact, they are totally different animals. They are demons in human shape".(W24)

That is clearly mentioned that malicious is located in all adult figure. But it is not at all a gender specific. In *BFG*, Sofie is portrayed and perceived as a feeble young girl. She is susceptible which we can feel through the words of the giant.

"You stole me, Sofie said. I did not steal you very much, said the BFG, smiling gently. After all, you is only a tiny little girl".(BFG46)

Sofie is neither weak nor passive. From the terrible and powerful giant Sofie and the BFG together saves the world. Sofie does not belong to the category of stereotypical heroine who appears in the fairytale. She takes all the things into her control being active and brave. The image of women is absent in *BFG*.

"My mother! Cried the BFG. Giants don't have mothers! Surely you is knowing that. I did not know that Sofie said. Whoever heard of a woman giant! Shouted the BFG, waving the snozzcumber around his head like a lasso. There never was a woman giant! And there never will be one. Giant is always men!"(BFG42)

As witches are always female, giants are always male. BFG acknowledges difference between male and female gender, “Do you have separate dream for boys and for girls? Sofie asked. Of course, the BFG said. If I is giving a girl's dream to a boy, even if it was a really whoppsy girl's dream, the would be waking up and thinking what a rot bungling grinksludging old dream that was (BFG96).

Hence there is absence of stereotypical fairy tale pattern in The BFG. As giants are always male there is no female giant in this novel. Sofie is depicted as strong girl. The novel Charlie and the chocolate factory do not contain any idiosyncratic differences between male and female. They are equally loathsome. Both the gender wins the golden tickets and they are active. The aunts are depicted as nasty cruel women. The depiction of the cruel aunts does link with the portrayal of malicious women characters in fairy tales. These aunts are unpleasant, evil women who bully the helpless James.

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