Questioning gender and the construction of family in children’s literature

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Abstract:
This dissertation questions gender and the construction of family in children’s literature. It provides an analysis of the influence of gender roles on the construction of family and its influence on the children both within the text, that is, the child characters, as well as outside the text, the child readers. This theme is tackled within a particular time frame starting from Victorian times up till Contemporary times. Chapter one, the introduction, gives a description of the family story within children’s literature for each examined period. It mainly provides an overview of how family story is constructed in each period and an analysis of the cultural context surrounding it. The changes which occur in each period of time are thus associated with cultural and societal circumstances. Chapter two focuses on Victorian stereotypes; providing an understanding of the traditional big family which mainly consists of the father, who is the breadwinner, the mother who is the domestic controller and the nurturer, and their children. It also looks at the different roles each member needs to follow - it is noted that the father’s main focus is on his profession; the source from which he earns a living, the mother is considered to be the ‘Angel in the House’, the person who epitomizes all the family members and children should be obedient to their parents’ rules. This chapter also indicates that family stories in the Victorian age are based on didacticism and moral values. Thus, it shows that religion is a dominant theme in Victorian times. This typical family's aspect is particularly analyzed through the book The Daisy Chain; or Aspirations (1856) by Charlotte Mary Yonge. Moreover, Louisa May Alcott's Little Women (1868) is discussed for its similarities to Yonge’s novel.

Chapter three focuses on the following century, that is, the twentieth century. Through the collection of Fudge Books by Jude Blume, this chapter portrays a new structure of family story. It notes that in this century, although having its own roots in Victorian fiction, authors tend to produce more realistic family stories that concern the occurrences of everyday life. Moreover, moral values and obedience seem to be given less importance and parents are involved more in the activities with their children. The most important thing that this chapter illustrates is the fact that despite the various changes that the twentieth century brings along with, the mother is still considered to be the backbone of the family and the role of the father is still associated with his profession. The crux of this dissertation is based on chapter four since it provides an analysis about those aspects of the construction of family and gender which have remained valuable and crucial up till modern times. The discussion is developed through the analysis of Anne Fine’s Flour Babies (1992). The experiment that the boys have to carry out serves as a trial to examine their own personal life; not only for their present times but also for future purposes. All the students fail in this experiment, except for the protagonist, Simon, who takes the project very seriously, as if he is a real parental figure himself. Through his own personal experience as well as through the adventure of the school project, Simon, whilst appreciating the role of the mother and thinking that she is the leading figure in the family, he strongly believes that for one’s upbringing, the presence of both parents is crucial and beneficial. Such arguments combined with analysis of previous chapters give an answer to both the dissertation’s title itself as well as to the influential child readers.

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Several studies on gender construction in children’s literature have adopted a poststructuralist approach. Bradford (1998) relied on poststructural feminism when she examined encoded gender ideologies in children’s stories of family relationships. Similarly, Hubler (2000) used this approach to examine a selection of children’s texts and demonstrated the subtle ways in which fiction allows readers to identify social structures. When looking at the role of language in children’s literature, Knowles and Malmkjæer (1996: 69) paid particular attention to the concept of “
