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**THE PORTRAYAL OF MALE AND FEMALE CHARACTERS IN FORM 2
AND FORM 3 NOVELS USED IN MALAYSIAN
SECONDARY SCHOOLS**

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work in this project paper is my own except for quotations and summaries which have been duly acknowledged.

09.10.2009

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to investigate how male and female characters are portrayed in four English novels used by Form 2 and Form 3 students in Malaysian secondary schools. It is believed that the content of books read by students can leave an effect on their gender development. If the content is biased towards gender, the students may be influenced to accept the biased beliefs. Therefore, the study aims to determine if characters in the novels are given different prominence, personality traits and roles. Through content analysis, the novels have been found to have unequal portrayal of male and female characters in terms of the number of characters depicted, the use of gender-specific pronouns, the personality traits and the roles played by the characters. These findings are, to some extent, consistent with the findings of earlier studies in Malaysia and other countries. Based on this conclusion, it is hoped that further studies on the content of textbooks will be carried out in Malaysia.



ABSTRAK

Kajian ini dijalankan untuk menyelidik cara watak-watak dipaparkan dalam empat novel Bahasa Inggeris yang digunakan oleh murid-murid Tingkatan 2 dan 3 di sekolah menengah di Malaysia. Isi kandungan buku dipercayai boleh meninggalkan kesan ke atas perkembangan jantina mereka. Jika buku-buku yang dibaca oleh murid mengandungi isi kandungan yang berat sebelah terhadap jantina, murid-murid mungkin boleh dipengaruhi sehingga mereka menerima idea-idea tersebut. Dengan demikian, kajian ini bertujuan untuk menentukan sama ada watak-watak dalam novel yang terpilih diberikan perhatian, perwatakan dan peranan yang berlainan. Melalui cara analisis isi kandungan novel, novel-novel tersebut didapati memaparkan watak-watak lelaki dan wanita secara berlainan dari segi jumlah watak yang ada, penggunaan sendinama, perwatakan dan peranan. Dapatan kajian ini kelihatan selaras dengan dapatan kajian lain yang telah dijalankan di Malaysia dan di luar negara. Dengan demikian, diharapkan bahawa di Malaysia, kajian tambahan akan dijalankan ke atas isi kandungan buku-buku teks.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ESL English as a Second Language

EFL English as Foreign Language

BSRI Bem Sex Role Inventory

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

In most societies, especially those which are patriarchal in nature, men and women are categorised differently. Women, devalued as the weaker sex, are regarded as inferior to men (Greene & Kahn, 1988). While men are frequently presented in the foreground, women are usually given a background position, thus giving them a secondary status as compared to men (Wikipedia, 2008). Besides that, different sets of roles are fixed for men and women, thus dictating how they behave. Men are supposed to be domineering, aggressive, and able to control their emotions. On the other hand, women should be submissive, nurturing and gentle. These roles are usually seen as natural; however, they are actually the ideologies of the patriarchal society that aim to put men and women in different categories. To ensure the aim is achieved, languages are used.

The ideologies of the patriarchal society can be manifested through languages. Language, by itself, may be a neutral vehicle of communication. Yet, when it is linked to a patriarchal society and its culture, it becomes a means of constructing and reinforcing the values and attitudes towards men and women which can be considered biased. The vocabulary, grammar, proverbs and other linguistic aspects can show this gender bias.

For example, English language has many examples. Men and women are given distinct address forms. Occupational titles such as ‘manager’ and ‘manageress’ can also imply the subordination of women and the superiority of men. Even some adjectives can bring biased implications. Then looking at grammar, the frequent use of male-specific pronouns such as ‘he’, ‘him’ and ‘his’ can imply that the role of men is more prominent. Finally, the creation of proverbs and sayings in English language such as “A man’s house is his castle.” shows the biased ideologies held by the patriarchal society.

With the many examples of gender-exclusive language, one can say that language is the tool to present the ideologies of the society. As this tool is being used in daily conversations and communications, the ideologies are continuously presented to the users. Consistent and constant exposure to those ideologies can be unconsciously absorbed by the users and thus, gradually be deep-rooted in their minds.

1.2 Statement of the problem

In Malaysia, there are too few analyses on gender bias and gender stereotyping in books. A study on gender biased content in four Malaysian upper secondary English textbooks used by students in Form 4 rural and urban schools in Negeri Sembilan showed male dominance (Sanda, 2003). Another study which was conducted by Bahiyah, Mohd. Subakir, Kesumawati, Yuen and Azhar (2008) on linguistic sexism and gender role stereotyping in Malaysian English language textbooks also found that females have second-place status as compared to males. Based on these limited findings, one can say that textbooks used by students in Malaysia do display gender-biased content. In relation to this issue, the main question is whether the same conclusion can be made for the content of the literary texts that have become the compulsory texts to be read by secondary schools students since 2000. Looking at the problem posed by the language textbooks, there is a need to investigate whether gender bias exists in the novels which are the literary texts used by students in Malaysian secondary schools.



1.3 Purpose of the Study

This study is based on previous studies, local and overseas, which indicated the presence of gender bias in school textbooks and literary texts. At some schools, novels and anthologies of short stories and poems are used as reading materials. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to find out whether there is biased portrayal of male and female characters in the novels used in the Form 2 and Form 3 English Language classes in lower secondary schools.

1.4 Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to seek answers to three questions. The questions are:

1. Are male characters in the texts given more prominence than female characters?
2. Is there any difference in the portrayal of male and female characters in terms of personality traits?
3. What are the major roles played by the male and female characters in the novels?

1.5 Significance of the Study

The significance of the study is related to the influence of reading materials used as learning materials in schools on the minds and development of students. Textbooks and literary texts are produced and used in classrooms to teach relevant subjects, but the selection of those books may not be carried out with the emphasis on the aspect of gender-neutral content and language. Materials, which can be important tools of teaching, present gender in a biased manner. Then this manner “impacts children’s attitudes and perceptions of gender-appropriate behavior in society” and “conditions boys and girls to accept the way they see and read the world, thus reinforcing gender images” (Fox, as cited in Manjari, 1998, p. 2). Hence, when students read those reading materials, they will



absorb the ideas, which may be biased towards gender, and then assume or learn that the gender roles presented are natural. Based on what they have obtained, they gradually develop their own perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and behaviour. Subsequently, they unconsciously help to consolidate the ideologies in the society as they behave in accordance to what are dictated.

However, if children are given reading materials with nontraditional and nonsexist content, they can react in a nonsexist way. In an experimental study on the responses of readers who were exposed to nonsexist reading materials, conducted by Scott and Feldman-Summers in 1979, findings pointed to nonbiased conclusions. The 3rd- and 4th-grade students who took part in the study were more likely to think that girls could behave like the female characters, which did not act in a traditional female-like manner, in the story read by them. Then when they read a story with the male main character being involved in a female activity, they also formed the idea that males could participate in that activity. Based on the results, Scott and Feldman-Summers concluded that “attitude change towards equity increased with increased exposure” (as cited in Sadker, Sadker & Klein, 1991).

Therefore, in the context of Malaysian education system, the novels used as compulsory reading materials in lower secondary schools can be the source of effect, either biased or nonbiased, depending on its content. In relation to this idea, this present study focuses on the content, which may be biased and unbeneficial to a healthier development of children. The students aged 14 and 15 years use two novels as their reading texts to prepare for the *Penilaian Menengah Rendah* or Form 3 public examination, therefore they will read and analyse each novel for one whole year. If the novels have content that has an unequal portrayal of the male and female characters, then the novels, which are considered as a source of modeling information and a means of socialising the children, will have a great impact on them. They will cause them to form gender-biased thoughts and perceptions, and grow up with the assumption that there are different gender roles in society, which, in reality, are stereotypic roles created by the society. Therefore, findings from this study will create awareness in the English language teachers so that they practise caution when using the novels to teach literature in their



classes. The findings can also be a guide to the curriculum development committee to select more appropriate novels that can help the gender development of school students.

1.6 Assumptions

The study is carried out based on the following assumptions:

1. English language teachers in every secondary school in Malaysia use two of the novels as the reading materials for Form 2 and Form 3 students in their preparation for their *Penilaian Menengah Rendah* examination.
2. The Form 2 and Form 3 students read both novels from the first chapter to the last chapter, and not only reference books for Literature for their understanding of the stories and their preparation for their *Penilaian Menengah Rendah* examination.
3. The writers of the novels are guided by their own gender knowledge, thus unconsciously portraying that knowledge in the content and the way they have written the novels.



1.7 Delimitations

The study is not concerned with the syntax and grammatical aspects of the English language as well as the discourse roles of the dialogues in the novels. There is also no analysis on the illustrations and also their captions in the novels.

1.8 Definitions of Terms

Biased portrayal of men and women

The phrase refers to several aspects concerning the presentation of men and women in media and also reading materials. Due to the influence of cultures and stereotypic



knowledge on gender, men and women are portrayed differently and in an unequal manner, mainly in media and reading materials. According to Bahiyah, Mohd. Subakir, Kesumawati, Yuen and Azhar (2008), the unequal depiction can be seen in:

- a) the frequency of appearance or invisibility of characters;
- b) the characters' social and occupational activities;
- c) the characters' personality traits.

Firstly, the male characters appear more frequently as compared to the female characters. The male characters and female characters are also depicted to have different social roles and occupations. Lastly, male characters are shown to have masculine characteristics while female characters possess feminine traits.

Environment

The word is defined as "the broad network of social influences that are encountered in everyday life" (Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p. 14). It does not only mean the surroundings of an individual in the physical sense which can leave an effect on the personal factors of the individual, but it also refers to the influence that comes from people in the individual's family, schools, outside the home and also from the media. These are the people whom the individual can always be in contact with, thus their behaviour, words, and even expressions can leave an effect on the individual's thoughts and beliefs.

Gender

This term is defined as "a person's social and cultural identity as male or female" (Shaffer & Kipp, 2007, p. 510). It does not bring any meaning connected to the genetic makings and physical attributes of an individual; instead it refers specifically to an individual being acknowledged with an identity, that is as a male or a female individual.

Gender identity

This phrase refers to "a person's sense of being male or female" (Lefton, 1994, p. 319). When growing up, individuals will develop the knowledge that the identities that they



possess are either male or female. Then they will behave accordingly to what deems to be appropriate to match their gender identities.

Gender roles

The phrase is defined as “the full range of behaviors generally associated with one’s gender” (Lefton, 1994, p. 320). Based on the knowledge of the appropriate behaviours, people establish who they are. However, as the society usually dictates or stresses on how a person with a particular gender should act, behave, dress and also play specific parts in the society, the gender roles held by individuals are often seen as stereotypic roles.

Gender stereotypes

Gender stereotypes can be defined as “typical beliefs about gender-based behaviors that are strongly expected, regulated, and reinforced by society” (Lefton, 1994, p. 320). Men and women are supposed to hold different roles and showing different sets of attributes.



Modeling

The term refers to “the tendency for a person to reproduce the actions, attitudes, and emotional responses exhibited by real-life or symbolic models” (Mischel, as cited in Helgeson, 2002, p. 155). Models can be family members, peers, characters in movies and books, famous people and also people who appear in the media. By observing and extracting selected information on their physical features, appearance, actions and behaviour, individuals can internalize the information and develop a sense of attitudes, expectations, thoughts and values which is then displayed in their own behaviour and words.

1.9 Summary

The present study focuses on the portrayal of male and female characters in the novels read by Form 2 and Form 3 students in Malaysian secondary schools. As some particular





ideologies on men and women are frequently presented through languages, it is appropriate to analyse the content of the selected texts. Moreover, in Malaysia, there were too few studies carried out on books used in local schools. It is hoped that the findings can be a guide to the educational authorities who need to ensure that students can get an input of knowledge that is not biased towards gender.

