



## GENDER ROLES AND STEREOTYPES IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: AN ANALYSIS

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### ABSTRACT

Children's literature plays a crucial role in shaping children's view on gender and subsequently with gender specific roles and stereotypes. Books help them in constructing ideas about themselves and others. They subconsciously become acquainted with culture, society and male and female roles and behaviour. The influence is sometimes so high and effective that they believe such roles to be true and put themselves into such roles and start behaving accordingly. They have perceptions for gender roles and stereotypes. Therefore, feminist literary theorists realize the importance of the influence texts have on the cultural ideals and perceptions of children and young adults. The aim of the paper is to analyse the gender roles and stereotypes in Veronica Roth's debut novel *Divergent* (2011). In doing so, the paper will look into both major and minor themes with regard to both gender roles and stereotypes using content analysis methodology from a feminist literary theory perspective. On the basis of the analysis made, the paper will then give certain guidelines for teachers and parents regarding selection of literary books for their children.

Keywords: Stereotype, patriarchy, gender, culture, feminism

### Introduction

Women are often portrayed in stereotypical ways in literature. They are often sketched as angels, witches, and step-mothers & even as monster in most of the children's literature. These typical and traditional stereotypes which demote women to 'angel' & "monster" significantly conflict with the women's sense of herself (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979). Books are the best & effective sources of transmitting culture. Through books they come to know about their own culture & tradition & of others as well. Children's literature plays an important role in forming ideas about society & social norms. After completing their reading they form certain perception about society and social norms, which somehow turns into knowledge and they start believing it to be true & put themselves into the same roles. Here, it is specific to gender roles & stereotypes. The purpose of this study is to analyse how male and female gender roles & stereotypes are sketched in children's literature with specific reference to Roth's *Divergent* using the technique of content analysis. The paper will then provide implications for parents, and teachers regarding selection of books for their children and how they can make sure that their environment should remain free from gender biasness. The paper will take into account three main theories i.e. feminist literary theory, gender development & transactional theory for this study.

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**Methodology:** The paper will take into account Veronica Roth's debut novel *Divergent* which was published in 2011, a children's literature book for the study. Content analysis methodology is being used here in this paper for analysing data.

**Literature Review:**

Feminist literary theorist showed a strong dissent to the literary & textual abuse of women as presented in different sort of literature. They argued that women are presented in stereotypical ways in literature. Showalter (1985) states, "In its earliest years, feminist criticism concentrated on exposing the misogyny of literary practice: the stereotyped images of women in the literature as angels or monster, the literary abuse or textual harassment of women in classical & popular male literature, and the exclusion of women from literary history" ( p.5). Feminist looked at literature as a social institution that is rooted both in its own literary traditions as well as in the artifacts from the society. They strongly argue that the representation of women needs to go beyond the traditional roles of being a mother or a lover. They should be sketched in multiple roles in literature. Children are very much affected by the stories presented to them through visual literature, oral literature or literature in writing. They start having the perceptions regarding the male & female gender and the peculiar roles associated to each type. Sex is biological fact, each human being is born with, a boy or a girl. Gender is the way they are supposed to behave male or female. In other words, the roles associated to each sex define gender. They then select roles and behaviour for themselves and act accordingly. It is possible, that the gender roles and stereotypes received in the early children through culture & society will remain continue in later stages of life too. Children grow as male or female according to the various roles associated to their gender. We can find numerous examples of gender stereotype prevalent in boys & girls with regard to cloths, colours, toys, food, sports, jobs, advertisements etc. This gender scheme becomes a type of guide, which tell them what attributes are linked to their sex & how should they behave. Bem (1981) stated, "As children learn the contents of society's gender schema, they learn which attributes are to be linked with their own sex and hence, with themselves" (p.355). And cross sex behaviour is not welcomed by the society. Bem & Lenney (1976) argued, "This avoidance could emerge either because sex – typed individuals are motivated to maintain a self – image as masculine or feminine or because they are motivated to present a public image of masculinity or femininity to those around them (p.48).

But Emmerich and Shepard (1982) argues that gender Stereotype learned in the early childhood may or may not continue during the adolescent or later periods of life "if a traditional sex stereotype is known to be absent during the chosen development end period, it is possible that the non-traditional consensus neutralizes the stereotype during prior developmental periods as well." (p.406) In fact, gender roles & stereotypes can be influenced and changed in late adolescence. Bartinini (2006) states, 'Katz (1979) predicted that adolescents would be less likely to adhere to gender role stereotypes & would become more flexible, especially when their peers are modelling & supporting this flexibility. As a matter of fact, books are one of the most important reasons for this flexibility. Books, especially those of literature, play an important role in changing people's opinion & views. They affect the human psychology most. Rosenblatt's transactional theory considers books as the most effective & successful method of transmitting social norms. Kinman & Henderson, (1985) believes that "Studies have found that the written word is one of the most powerful ways to transmit ideas & information". (p.885)

During the process of reading there occurs a transaction between the reader & the writer. And in the process of interpreting and comprehending the text, the intended meaning, embedded message, & cultural values are transmitted to the reader. Reader's schema plays a great role in the comprehension of a text.

There are large numbers of children's literature books which represent gender roles and stereotypes and then great transition in their prescribed roles. The paper will take into account a children's literature book

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Divergent written by Roth in 2011. The paper will analyse the book using content analysis methodology to find out instances of gender roles & stereotypes associated to male and female gender. The paper will also look into the examples of transition in such roles. By doing this the aim of the paper is to provide certain suggestions to teachers and parents regarding how they can make their environment more gender neutral for their children. It also suggests, parents & teachers to select the books having examples of strong female character and which promotes gender equality.

### Typological Coding and Findings:

While analysing the content of the book, some of the major instances of female & male stereotype & gender role found are presented here with interpretation.

### Traditional Female Stereotype:

1. "Stay away from me," I say quietly. My body feels rigid and cold & I am not angry, I am not hurt I am nothing. I say my voice low, "never come near me again."(Beatrice, p.300) These lines reflect that females are taught to forgive. Tris (female character in the book) doesn't forgive Al (male character in the book) for being with the group who tried to harm her.
2. Tris shows the lack of autonomy when she acts differently than who she really was. Four (male character in the book) asked Tris to show some vulnerability if she wants her to be protected and save. He said to Tris, "The other won't be jealous if you show some vulnerability. Even if it isn't real" (Roth, 2011, p.285). This shows that females are supposed to be weak & vulnerable and always seeking help of males to protect them. This is believed to be one of the personality trait of female gender & cross-sex behaviour, where they show themselves to be brave & strong is not accepted by the society. This was embedded in Al's mind from his very childhood and he can't able to accept Tris showing bravery & courage, so he started harassing her physically to show her weak & inferior to male.
3. *Damozel in distress* is a major male stereotype where they are seen as protecting & saving female. There are many instances of beauty in distress in Divergent. In Divergent when group were asked to play the game "capture the flag" then Tris decided to climb to the top of an old Ferris wheel, as she thought this to be the best route to capture the flag. Even after her best attempts when she was not able to reach one of the rungs and can't able to hold on much longer, then Four ends up saving Tris by turning the Ferris wheel & lowering Tris to the ground just in time. This proves that female may show an act of bravery but at the end it is male who saves her from all dangers of life.
4. In one instance, when Tris stands up for Al in the game of throwing knives, then Eric,(male character) makes Tris stand in front of the target while Four throw knives at her. Then Four nicks her ear with one of the knives, and let her know afterward that he did this on purpose as he wants her to get out of the situation. He says "yes I did", he says quietly. "And you should thank me for helping you". (Roth; 2011 p.165). This shows male protecting female and also believing that female should be thankful & grateful for the help. This is a typical male stereotype.
5. One of the female conventional stereotypes is *physical appearance*. This is very much highlighted in the book. Females are supposed to look beautiful & sophisticated, passive & submissive. This is an innate need for suitable marriage proposals. In Divergent, Tris has never given much thought to clothing or appearance. And this, she believes was the main reason of Four not falling in love with her. Rather he regards her as a sister and someone he needs to protect. She said, "I wish I was taller. If I was tall, my



narrow build would be described as 'willowy instead of childish' and he might not see me as little sister he needs to protect" (Roth 2011, P.312)

### Traditional Male Stereotype

There are many instances in the book showing conventional male stereotype. Here are few:

1. The traditional male stereotype that is highlighted in *Divergent* is that Four, a male character, is exhibited as male being aggressive, assertive, controlling, and strong. When Jeanine captivate Tris and Four to kill them, then Four shows his assertive, aggressive and strong behaviour by saying that " Now that your Intelligence has been verified, you might want to get on with killing us: you have a lot of Abnegation leaders to murder after all." (Roth 2011, p.428)
2. Another conventional male stereotype is highlighted from the instance when Al with his friends attacked Tris and harasses her physically because Tris was becoming strong and brave whereas he believes that females are supposed to be weak and vulnerable. This is what embedded in AL's mind from his childhood and he can't able to accept Tris showing act of bravery and courage, so he started torturing her.

### Transition in Gender Roles and Stereotypes:

There are instances in the story showing departure in the traditional gender roles and stereotypes. This proves that transition in gender roles and stereotypes is possible in the later stages of life with the help of context. In the book *Divergent*, transition in typical female stereotype is shown from being passive, frightened, weak, gentle, silly, confused, dependent, and emotional to assertive, strong, independent, and intelligent, risk taking and determined.

Transaction in male Stereotypes is shown from being active, strong, brave, rough, unemotional, messy, decisive, leader, aggressive, to – emotional, weak, organized, submissive, caring, follower, sexual restraint, home maker, preparing meals etc. few examples are:

1. It is a female gender role to cook food but in the story we see an example where all the family members take turns in preparing meals. It is not just a female's job. Tris notes "But my brother made breakfast this morning, and my mother prepared our lunches, and my father made dinner last night, so it's my turn to cook....." (Roth 2011, P.30)
2. Stereotyped males do not show their emotions. Tris tries to talk to Al about what he is feeling. Al gets emotional and cries. Al cries, "I just..." the tears that have been gathering in his eyes spill over, wetting his cheeks, "want to be alone." (Roth, 2011, p. 270). It is unusual for some males to allow others to see them cry. Al has no difficulty hiding his emotions from Tris. Al is an example of a male moving away from a typical male stereotype because he is reluctant to harm others and is open with showing his emotions.
3. Tris showed departure from the typical female stereotypes throughout *Divergent*. She kept on showing her bravery and determination. She also stood up for herself and doesn't back down when she was challenged. Tris showed a role of more progressive woman. She began to come out of her shell and moved towards being a less stereotypical female. She was no more weak & meek. She shows examples of her intelligence ever.

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On the basis of the results drawn, and interpretations made from the typological coding from the book, here are a few suggestions & implications made for teachers & parents. These suggestions will help both teachers & parents to make their male & female children more gender neutral.

**Implications for Teachers**

1. While teaching any literature book, teacher should ask both female and male students to analyse the book / texts they are reading or their favourite literature book from the perspective of gender roles. In this regards , Rosenblatt (1976) states, “The more conscious the individual is of the nature of the cultural forces with which he is interacting, the more intelligently can he accept or resist them, and the more intelligently can he modify their power and their direction” (p. 155-156)
2. Teacher should make a point to discuss male & female gender role & stereotype and should criticize such associations. Rather she should focus more on the departure of roles & should appreciate it.
3. Teacher may allow girls as well as boys to express their feelings regarding gender roles.
4. Teacher should make students cautious that they should be reading characters as literary characters only and should not enter themselves into such roles.
5. Teachers can select books in which the characters have distinct personalities regardless of their genders. It’s important for children to be exposed to books that can break stereotypes.
6. Teachers should develop their critical thinking skills through various tasks and activities. With the development of critical thinking skills, children can develop their own independent thoughts, a greater understanding of societal issues, and can become more engaged and responsible citizens in the future.

**Implications for Parents:**

1. Like teachers, parents are also suggested to talk to their children regarding gender role & stereotypes.
2. Parents need to demonstrate through their behaviour that it is very normal in doing cross-gender roles and what equality actually means.
3. Parents should stop associating certain roles & behaviour or toys and games, as gender specific. They should demonstrate all roles are general and anyone can do them.
4. Parents should talk of equality & feminism with their sons too, to make them respect female.
5. They should empowered their daughters physically and psychologically & should make them feel and understand that their gender is not a restriction on them.
6. Parents should involve themselves in doing all types of household chores, so that they can make their children understand that such works are the responsibility of every member of the family and such roles are not gender specific.

**Conclusion**

The paper has analysed the gender roles and stereotypes which is the basic aspect of our society. Such messages are also transferred to the children through the books they read, especially literature books. The paper has analysed such roles with the specific reference of Roth’s book *Divergent*, using content analysis methodology. The paper argued that there can be transition in such stereotypes by consciously taking a few

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steps. The paper presents few suggestions for both teachers and parents through which they can change such stereotypes and can make their society more gender neutral.

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