TRAVERSING AND CONTESTING THE TEXTUALITY OF GENDER IN MAINSTREAM CHILDREN'S FICTION

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Abstract

The article first outlines the way in which mainstream children's fiction has traditionally sought to address and undermine the artificiality of oppositional and hierarchical gender paradigms. Pro-feminist texts that abound in mainstream children's literature have never really extricated themselves from the bonds of gender-related binarisations and hierarchizations because their approach in delineating girl protagonists has been premised primarily upon a mere reversal of masculine and feminine defined attributes. By insisting only on the examination and reversal of attributes, mainstream children's fiction has fallen short of investigating narrative mechanisms which are essential to the understanding of how subjectivities, regardless of their feminine or masculine inflections, are constituted in the first place. To address this issue, it is argued that children's mainstream literature should embrace such literary devices as metafiction and genre mixing. The article goes on to demonstrate the kind of impact these devices have in challenging and undermining the socially constructed notions of oppositional and hierarchical gender paradigms on those children who have been subject to traditional literary socialization.

One of the main interests in children's literature today has to do with the question of how to challenge and redress contemporary oppositional and hierarchical gender paradigms without unwittingly reproducing the very same dictates of gender binarism and hierarchisation from which escape is sought. As it is, enforced gender binarisation and hierarchisation not only require that masculinity be currently assembled under the characteristics of being strong, tough, independent, active, aggressive, violent, unemotional, competitive, powerful, commanding and rational, or that femininity be recuperated exclusively under the supposedly remaining attributes of being beautiful, soft and yielding, passive, self-effacing and caring, vulnerable, powerless and intuitive (Stephens in Pennell, 138). This pattern of gender binarisation and hierarchisation also insists on the so sedimented and consolidated notions of femininity and masculinity to be entrenched, natural and intrinsic states of mind and body.

1 As a working definition of children's literature the author follows Marija Nikolajeva's proposition whereby the term children's literature refers to all the fiction written for children aged between 0 and 15 years (Nikolajeva 1996).
when in fact they function as a strictly organizing principle. That is, they stand for “inherently relational concepts, which have meaning in relation to each other, as a social demarcation and a cultural opposition” (Connel 1995, 44).

Despite the expectations or postulations to the contrary, the majority of mainstream and even pro-feminist children’s texts have never really extricated themselves from the bonds of hierarchical gender binarism. In their effort to wrench the female subject from the clutches of imposed passivity, denigration and invisibility, they have taken recourse to re-appropriating the attributes traditionally assigned to masculine subjects and bestowing them upon the female defined protagonists. By means of such a simple and unquestioned reversal of attributes the female character now comes to feature as the only one to have access to the position of authoritative power, domination and privilege. Such a simple reconceptualisation of female subjectivity in children’s literature has more often than not also implied that masculine subjects be now posited as the site of ‘pejoration’ and ‘demonisation’ or at best as being “emotionally inarticulate or emotionally completely unavailable” (Pennell 122). In this vein, by inverting traditional gender schemata some pro-feminist and the majority of mainstream children’s texts have continued to uphold the framework of artificially polarized and hierarchical gender relations, rather than, for instance, drawing attention to the mechanisms implicit in the normative patterning of masculinity and femininity itself. Such an interrogative stance could for instance also help to raise the possibility of unveiling and exploring an array of masculine subjectivities which resist recruitment under the normative script of hegemonic masculinity. These have been by default mired in abjection and constantly made subject to vilification, precisely because they refuse to embrace the so called “relentless impetus to distinction where competitiveness is understood to be the essential masculine experience and ‘winning’ the only means of establishing self-worth” (Pennell 122).

Similarly, those progressively dubbed children’s texts that seek to redress the entrenched gender scripts outside pro-feminist marked contexts tend to slide back into traditional narrative patterning which requires that narrative closures recompose masculinity under the sign of the preferred ontological state. In these children’s texts masculinity with its traditional assortment of attributes comes to be paradoxically valorised as an escape route and a shield for a girl protagonist against the indignities of disempowerment and dehumanisation embedded in feminine subject positions. Finally, those children’s texts that seek to redefine the concepts of masculinity by means of reshuffling gender attributes or attendant material practices seem to flounder along the same lines as seemingly pro-feminist texts. Boy protagonists, according to Pennell (forthcoming), may be endowed with such characteristics as being caring and vulnerable, thereby displaying the so-called reformulated ‘sensitive masculinity’. However, such shifting in the distribution of attributes seems to be permissible only as long as boy protagonists continue to function as the locus of decision-making and intellectual enterprises. Equally, a very popular reappropriation of such material practices as crocheting, embroidery or knitting in these progressively dubbed children’s texts does not serve the purpose of teaching boy protagonists to become attuned to the needs of others and to rely on negotiation and consensus as their operative principles. Rather, these practices are more often than not incorporated in the traditional framework of
one or other type of fierce peer competition with the male protagonist keeping an eye on beating and vanquishing his opponents. In this way, seemingly ground-breaking evening out of activities like crocheting, knitting and embroidery gets to be completely undermined. The activities are simply once again collapsed under the old matrix of hegemonic masculinity and its all too familiar impetus to distinction and assumption of power. Illustrative of this point is Pennell’s discussion of Fabric Crafts in which the boy protagonist takes up embroidery not really so much for the sake of proving himself capable of excelling at whatever skill is at hand but to strengthen his superiority over other students with whom he enters into a school competition he wants to win at all costs. Seized up by the boy character, the activity itself may be shorn of pejorative connotations and is actually revalorised to signify such qualities as manual deftness, creativity and perseverance. However, it still remains subsumed under the traditional matrix of power structures, which goes to show that the reshuffling of gender attributes or their attendant activities alone hardly brings about the necessary changes in redressing the hierarchical and oppositional tenets of gender binarism.

All in all, mainstream children’s literature in spite of its sporadic efforts to undermine and obliterate gender boundaries reinstates and perpetuates the patriarchally informed oppositional and hierarchical binarism of gender relations. Dwelling on the surface of reshuffled gender attributes does not generate sufficient change “as these do not result in shifts in power relations among characters nor do they alter story coherences and closures” (Pennell 125). On the contrary, the unbalanced power distribution embedded in this binary system is in fact preserved intact, mainly because genre conventions which mould expectations and regulate restrictive structuration of femininity and masculinity themselves remain unquestioned and unchallenged. Modern adventure stories stand for a case in point. Their female characters may be swaddled into attractive layers of reformulated characteristics including bravery, self-initiative and strong determination. However, these girl protagonists are eventually either completely phased out, or diluted and remodelled so that they can be once again contained within the traditional scaffolding of adventure genres. These of course require that they hold only supportive roles or pose as an ultimate reward for masculine heroism. Consequently, the closures of modern adventure stories continue to rally around the depictions of feminine subjects as stiflingly ‘overbearing’ and ‘practically ineffectual’, advocating their “dependency on masculine leadership, expertise and ingenuity”, thereby reviving the endlessly recycled myth of masculinity as “the legitimate site of action and power” (Pennell 125).

Furthermore, an approach based solely on the reshuffling of gender attributes also precludes the possibility of interrogating the way images of masculinity and femininity are established in the first place. It fails to shed light on the way images of masculinity and femininity are invested with seemingly immutable, impregnable meanings and infused with emotions, which in turn not only invite passionate attachments but also draw the reader’s commitments. Such an approach therefore skirts by a wide breadth the intricacies of language, discursive practices and most importantly the processes of focalisation and point of view, through which “subject positions are constructed and ideological assumptions inscribed” (Stephens 1992: 81). It is narrative devices and strategies such as metafiction and genre-mixing, which mainstream chil-
dren’s literature has kept confined to the margins, that prove to be especially instru­
mental in interrogating the textuality of gender in children’s literature. These narra­
tive techniques serve to question the validity of the binary opposition by foregrounding
the slippery slope of the linguistic repertoire behind which it barricades, and by ex­
posing and problematizing the mechanisms of knowledge production, thereby also
calling into question the world’s broader knowability and the stability of its encrypted
categorisations. The rest of this paper therefore seeks to examine and delineate the
potential these literary techniques have in disentangling and challenging the textual
production of gendered subjectivity in children’s literature, primarily realistic fiction,
as they lay open and point to the way a narrative frame is also complicit in spawning
and consolidating persistent essentialist notions of gender. This part of the paper takes
as its interrogative point of departure the social construction and sedimentation of femininity, which in children’s literature finds its most visible textual realizations in
the form of the fairy tale genre, romance, girls’ school story and domestic fiction.
Most of these genres feature as a derivative of bildungsroman aimed at girls. At the
same time we seek to address the actual relevance these literary techniques have when
it comes to exploring the textuality of gender in children’s realistic fiction in the form
of an action research conducted among a sample of 13 and 14-year-old primary school
pupils.

Postmodernist narrative strategies in children’s literature are not mined simply
for their potential of splitting open traditional structural conventions. They are espe­
cially appreciated for offering young readers a wide range of interrogative reading
positions. Metafiction and genre-mixing enable young readers to occupy multiple,
most often contradictory and yet distanced subject positions so that their attention is
drawn to the function of language and socio-cultural influences/factors in the con­
struction, textual representation and perpetuation of socially regulated and monitored
subjectivities. Such a positioning also facilitates the understanding of gendered sub­
jectivity as a conglomerate, an intersection of a variety of appropriated cultural dis­
courses and textual practices which interpellate one into a symbolic order by simulta­
neously empowering and constraining that individual. In delineating textual strategies
which allow for such gender-related interrogative reading positions, this part draws
mainly on the concepts developed by Robyn McCallum (1999a, 1999b) and John
Stephens (1999), which underlie the understanding of subjectivity in general. The
strategies we seek to expand and tailor here to meet the needs of investigating and
contesting the traditional textuality of gendered subjectivities in children’s literature
include primarily strategies such as genre-mixing, metafiction and split third person
character focalization.

When it comes to the interrogation and undermining of traditional textuality of
gender, genre-mixing proves to be especially useful on a number of accounts. Most
importantly, genre-mixing serves to foreground and question the organisation and trans­
mission of knowledge typical of individual genres\(^2\). It does so by concurrently run­

\(^2\) Encoded within a genre memory is a complex network of lingering socio-historical factors which
informed its conception and which still continue to shape and determine the sphere of interests and self­
deﬁned problems to be pursued in the genre’s naturalization and regulation of gender relations. Fairy
tales continue to endorse the image of sedate, timid, languid, yielding and self-effacing femininity by
ning usually two genres on two respective literary planes, with one always discussing the literary conventions, story constituents and implications of ideologically inscribed meanings of the other. A novel based on this approach typically takes the shape of two alternating narratives, where for instance a girls’ romance school story can be juxtaposed against journal entries of a heroine no longer under the spell of what turns out to be a disillusioning romantic love. This dialogic engagement between genres and the contrapuntal narrations thus produced allows for an informed reading position as the blending and clashing of genres with one another constantly challenges the significance of their closures. It puts under the magnifying lens the limited horizon of utopian expectations fostered by genre conventions such as fairy tales and romances. Comparative reading positions for example enable readers to grasp the “hollowness of romantic endings because they have simultaneously been reading about the aridity of the heroine’s subsequent life through journal entries” (Stephens and McCallum, 1999). Yet, as McCallum succinctly points out later in her *Ideology of identity in Adolescent Fiction* (1999) such multi-voicedness must be carefully groomed as it can be easily “contained and repressed through the presence of a dominant authorial or narratorial point of view” or the “lack of register of differentiation” (1999: 210). The end result of such superficially constructed frames of narrative investigations may easily lead to the reintroduction of the old and falsely propagated notion of genre being a transparent medium, rather than pointing to the understanding of the genre as a specific linguistic code that forges and inscribes meanings.

In investigating the textuality of gender in mainstream children’s literature, metafictional approach can be put to efficient use. Metafictional contradiction, for example, may centre on a protagonist encountering different versions of herself which inhabit alternative realities. As a fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its own mechanisms of meaning-making, of creating and sustaining the scripts of gender-dividedness, metafiction in this case serves to lay bare castigating powerful women either as witches, as evil women who lure, control and conspire or as Disney modern animated versions would have it, as disruptive femme fatales whose uncontained, overflowing, excessive bodies unmistakenly come to signify ‘the enveloping, consumptive sexuality of the deadly woman’ (Mallan 2000: 29). Deliberately cast in these roles, powerful women are condemned to destruction and elimination. Female curiosity and self-defined activity are automatically depicted as courting disaster, so that the award and pay-off for female characters in these tales lies solely in the subscription to male defined values of femininity - such as obedience, docility, patience, and suffering – thus making them deserving of marriage to the prince (Seago 2000: 147). This closure in turn, of course, parades as the enticing source of genuine personal happiness and ultimate female fulfilment.

Romance genre works under the pretext of providing women readers with an escape from unequally balanced heterosexual relationships. Such a utopian vista of imaginary control over one’s own destiny is fostered and made possible because a heroine turns her victimisation into a form of heroism. This transforms her into an active, even triumphant but always self-denying character who is allowed a sense of competence and personal achievement providing she colludes with the patriarchal patterns of femininity. The narrative suspense thus always rests on physical and psychological journeys, their sudden twists and turns the active but self-sacrificing heroine is going to take to complete her self-induced course on tamed femininity.

Bildungsromans designated for girl readers exploit the very same paradigm where growing up in fact means growing down; tomboyishness must be renounced as a transitory period in favour of learning to be dependent and submissive (Pratt 1983: 16).
the rigidity of spaces and positions from which a female subject has been allowed to
speak or be seen. By criticizing methods of fiction's own construction, metafiction
shatters what in children's literature is still a persistent myth of fiction being a mere
representational system. Instead it foregrounds and brings to the young readers' atten­
tion the awareness that fiction itself is a manipulative tool of choices and creations,
not an imitation of the world but an imitation of its discourses, which makes fiction
complicit in the propagation of socially restrictive scripts of femininity.

And finally, split third person character focalisation can be brought in to investi­
gate the textuality of gender. This narrative strategy has to do with the splitting of
narration into two parallel narrative strands. These strands are marked as standing
apart by shifts in the temporal and spatial relationships. Both strands are focalised by
the same female character but from two different vantage points in time and therefore
from two separate subject positions which are impregnated with different personal
and cultural contexts of their respective temporal positionings (McCallum, 1999: 134,
144). McCallum stipulates that "while by the end of the novel young readers know that
A and B are the same character, it is still difficult not to think of them as 2 different
characters... Because the older A and younger B both focalise, they both occupy dis­
crete and equally valid subject positions. They might represent aspects of the same
character but they are not identical. They occupy independent subject positions which
for readers are coexistent and not entirely assimilable to each other" (1999: 134, 136).
McCallum further observes that "the implication is that the subjectivity of the
character(s) is being presented as contingent upon, and constructed through, the sub­
ject positions which they occupy within various contexts, rather than being essential
or given" (1999: 135). The paramount importance of such a textual strategy lies in the
nature of the reading position it carves out for the reader as s/he is effectively denied
the possibility of identifying fully with either A or B. Instead the kind of reading that
is invited is that of retrospective and analytical deconstruction of gendered subjectiv­
ity not as an experientially coherent, singular and immutable entity but in fact as an
amalgam of interlocked discourses and appropriated subject positions.

When it comes to practical application of these strategies in a classroom situa­
tion, a number of questions start to surface. What is in fact the true pragmatic effect
that these strategies and reading positions have on problematising mainstream chil­
dren's literature and its underlying notion of a single coherent and essentialist gendered
subjectivity? What critical insights do pupils who have been the recipients of tradi­
tionally literary socialization really derive from these textual strategies and their ex­
ploration of textual constructions and regulations of gendered subjectivities? To ex­
plore these issues, we conducted a study among a representative group of 10 primary
school pupils aged 13 and 14. These students were all Slovene and were attending
advanced-level English classes. The study itself was based on an adaptation of the
first textual strategy presented above, which proceeded along the lines of combining
together parallel readings of a girls' adventure story by the Slovene author Desa Muck
(Out there in the open, 1996) and a domestic fiction story by Lois Lowry (Anastasia
on her own, 1992). The former exploits the paradigm of the boys' adventure story by
simply reshuffling some of the gender attributes without simultaneously addressing
the problem of inscribed gender inequity, thus merely reinforcing the existent hierar­
chical and oppositional premises of gender binarism. The latter novel endeavours to undo traditional patterns of self-effacing and yielding femininity, but its attempt to do so, it fails miserably. What the reader ends up with is merely and approximation of feminist glibness, as the teenage protagonist and, for a good measure, her mother too are gradually once again locked into the monotony of household chores and caring for other male members of the family primarily at the expense of having their career or school ambitions either derailed or sidelined.

This parallel reading (which counted as an improvised genre-mixing) led the students to expressing their dissatisfaction with the casting of the female roles by observing that mothers, especially those in adventure stories, merely exist and can win recognition and visibility only as long as they appear in a hero’s purely supportive role, profusely shedding tears while offering him unwavering emotional support and comfort. On the basis of this parallel, mixed-genre reading, students could point out that mothers pursuing a professional career are hampered in their efforts to have their projects carried out as their opinions at work are more often than not disregarded. Similarly, by drawing on *Out in the open*, they observe that even though girl characters in adventure stories venture out of the constricting parameters of domesticity, they are symbolically returned to the very same confines of domesticity. This is because the world through which they move refuses to and is unable to establish a rapport with them unless they fall back on performing the familiar set of menial and caring tasks associated with home keeping and emotional labour that needs to be pumped into the maintenance of the community’s overall well-being. Thus, the two girl protagonists in *Out in the Open* are barred from instigating any meaningful adventures as their steps in such direction are met with and undercut by adults’ stern looks of disapproval, tight-lipped admonishing silences, failures of cooperation or straightforward persecution. Instead of at least making progress from one set of fully developed enterprises to another as is customary in boys’ adventure stories, the two protagonists’ main preoccupation, significantly, consists in staying on the run from encountering or even brushing against proper adventures as these spell danger emanating from the adults’ unfavourable reactions. This in turn triggers a chain of specifically shaped events which lead the two protagonists to abandon their probes into the unknown and, as the students themselves point out, rely ever more heavily on the external help and expertise of their new boy acquaintances whom they come to serve as helpmates. It is only after this reversal of roles that the two protagonists are allowed to seek and

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3 The enthronement of the boys as the indisputable and even rightful masterminds of the rest of the expedition along the Slovene coast is covertly accomplished and given its final ideological twist of justification as the reader is subtly invited to judgmentally sift through the contents of the shopping trolleys belonging to Vlasta and Rudi respectively. The two have been entrusted with the task of procuring the weekly rations for a harsh journey ahead of the group. However, the money is running low, which calls for prudent decisions to be made on the part of the respective shoppers. While Vlasta’s trolley is found to be brimming over with sweets, chocolate bars, all sorts of salamis (her passion) and fresh baked buns, that is the whole range of quickly perishable or irrelevant goods which are additionally topped by a selection of comics, a neat notebook and a pencil, nail varnish, a bar of scented soap, a comb and a hand-mirror, Rudi’s carefully selected items include tinned food, packets of rusk, dried fruit, powdered milk, vitamin supplies, a guide book, fishing-tackle and first-aid kit. This distribution of goods also introduces and seals the dichotomous distribution of characteristics with rationality and prudence being grafted upon the boy character, whereas the girl character is to be assessed on the grounds of being
secure their footing in the outside world, where their reconciliation to such dutifully performed tasks as cooking, cleaning and doing the laundry for the two boys is installed and amplified as a much approved demonstration of selfless love. As for adventure stories featuring a mixed cast of both girl and boy protagonists, the pupils express overt concern over the fact that “girls are deliberately given less demanding tasks”, that “boys are indiscriminately believed to be more courageous, they are always running missions while girls are condemned to endless waiting”, or that it is “the boys who mount and run expeditions while girls are forced to merely eavesdrop or listen to what they’ve got to say” (personal notes, May 1999).

Interestingly enough, the shrewdness and poignancy of students’ observations notwithstanding, their experimental rewrites of the very same stories offered into earlier analytical reading demonstrate a wide discrepancy between what they are able to discern and criticise as a result of the adopted reading strategies on the one hand, and what they continue to write on the other, as the excerpts provided below amply document.

...[A girl and a boy] were just about to tackle the steep incline of the road when they heard somebody weeping and sobbing. The girl stopped and listened but Rudi was already dragging her away from the scene, because he was aware of the pending danger of the two of them being found out [and sent back home] if they continued to dawdle any longer. But Vlasta, in a bout of determination, nearly dislocated his shoulder as she wrenched herself free and proceeded in the direction where the sobs were coming from... (personal archive, emphasis added) [1]

...Vlasta felt sorry for the poor crying girl, and seeing that she was dizzy and confused, she wanted to help. But the problem was that she was no sportswoman. She knew only too well that Rudi would put up a fierce fight/protest against carrying her back to their shelter. However, Vlasta was a diplomat, a real coxer. Her subtle flat­tery left Rudi with no other option but to yield to her demands and grant her what she wished. (emphasis added) [2]

...it took Anastasia three days to fully recuperate and take her surroundings in. But it also took her three days to recount her story to her new friends. Anastasia told them all about the way she got lost on the big Slovene coast. She talked about her family, her little brother and her feelings of helplessness, too. But Taja and Vlasta preferred to hear about her American experiences and what America was like. In this respect, they acted very selfishly. (emphasis added) [3]

These writings are visibly punctuated by students’ conscious endeavours to address the problem of gender inequity and distribution of gender attributes by bestowing on female characters such characteristics as strong will and determination [evident from excerpt 1]. Yet the weight of these attempts is continuously undermined and overturned, as the young authors slip back into traditional moulds of patterning femi-
ninity primarily as the site of helplessness (excerpt 2). In this respect, a female character remains obstructed and constrained in her exercise of shared power; her access to it is always indirect, limited and unreliable as it can be gained only by means of scheming and being sly [2]. Helplessness becomes a common denominator of even those fictional female characters whom students first unanimously declared to be “smart, competent and self-sufficient” (personal notes, May 1999). Yet, later in the students’ writings, whenever these characters find themselves transported out of their original household domains, they are automatically transformed into ‘crying, sobbing, self-conscious and wretched’ girls. All these female characters continue to be evaluated in terms of the extent of emotional support, understanding and care they offer to the others, and are severely criticised or berated for straying away from this socially entrenched script of femininity by being name-tagged and marginalized as selfish [3].

The students’ written contributions display a tenacious grip traditional literary socialization holds over young readers, and is most evident in their story coherences and tight-knit closures, which, in spite of the students’ endeavours to the contrary, continue to be heavily saturated and eventually fraught with oppositional and hierarchical structuring of gender relations. Nevertheless, inculcated values of femininity and masculinity are not altogether impossible to dispense with as demonstrated by the application of postmodernist literary approaches to the interrogation of the textuality of gender in children’s literature. The ideological significance of the traditionally entrenched patterns of masculinity and femininity can be successfully addressed and pried open by the students themselves, as long as they can rely on alternative reading positions. But these must yet find their way into the midst of mainstream children’s literature in order to really challenge or provide an alternative to the persistent tenets of traditional literary socialisation.

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