

# ***The (De) Construction of Gender Identity in Children's Literature Written in English by Sri Lankan Authors***

Sabreena Niles  
ELTU, University of Kelaniya  
sabreenaniles@yahoo.com

## ***Abstract***

This research paper is an exploration of the social constructions of gender identities portrayed in selected texts written in English for children by Sri Lankan authors. It draws from *Mythil's Secret* by Prashani Rambukwella (2009), *Paduma Meets the Sunbird* by Nihal de Silva (2006) and *Mona's Mission Impossible* by Razana Sameem (2009). The study is based on the premise that children's literature produced in Sri Lanka by Sri Lankan authors would seek to explore the nuances of gender identities that are constructed within Sri Lanka.

The goal of this paper is to deconstruct the social constructions of gender identities that are portrayed in the selected texts in an attempt to analyze the specific gender roles that are socially acquired by children. This study addresses the question of how gender identities of children, within a Sri Lankan society, are depicted in the selected texts, and evaluates the assignment and acquisition of gender roles therein. It limits itself to deconstructing the portrayal of gender identities, and also seeks to unearth the different forces of socialization that influence the molding of a child's gender identity, while examining the process of socialization and other contributing factors relevant to the construction of gender identities within Sri Lanka. This paper addresses a gap in research in children's literature produced in Sri Lanka in English, and takes an interdisciplinary approach utilizing feminist, psychoanalytic and sociological theories.

**Keywords:** Gender identity, Social construction, Gender roles, Socialization

## ***Children's Literature***

In the introduction to *Children's Literature: An Anthology 1801 – 1902*, Peter Hunt (2001: 15) quotes Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, a renowned children's literature critic, who aptly states that “the definition of ‘children's literature’ lies at the heart of its endeavour; it is a category of books the existence of which absolutely depends on supposed relationships with a particular reading audience; children.” Therefore, children's literature strives to communicate something of infinite importance to its child reader in order to establish a connection with its audience. Literature is viewed as “an integral part of the process by which nation-states create themselves and distinguish themselves from other nations” and national literature is defined as “consciously constructed pieces of the national culture,” (Corse 1997: 9). Therefore, children's literature is able to create a vital link with the child reader through developing an indigenous form of literature that portrays the distinctive identities that are constructed within that particular community or nation.

In this light it is essential to probe the content of texts produced in Sri Lanka for children, to comprehend the different social constructions of identities that are reflected in these novels. Thus the overall goal of this research paper is to unearth the preconceived notions and existing constructions of identities, particularly gender identities, portrayed in children's literature produced in Sri Lanka in English. This research finds its significance in the above mentioned goal and thus bases itself on the premise that Sri Lankan authors who contextualize their texts in a Sri Lankan setting would seek to portray the nuances of gender identities that are constructed within Sri Lanka.

## ***Childhood and Identity Formation***

Kimberley Reynolds (1994: 18), who explores the historical development of childhood, defines childhood as a “social construct”. Likewise, Lisa Paul (1996: 109), a feminist children's literature critic, negates the concept of a stable identity through investigating the manner in which identity is “constructed by the socializing forces” encountered daily. As a result of the impact of numerous socializing forces, identity becomes a “socio cultural process” which is “constantly under construction” (Singer & Singer 2001: 310). In *Language and Gender* Judith Butler presents a clear definition of gender as “something we do” as opposed to something we are born with (as cited in, Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003, pp. 10-13), and socialization is “a life-long process”, particularly critical in the formative years of childhood, (Pilcher & Whelehan 2004: 160).

Therefore, it could be concluded that gender identity is a social construct that is continuously subject to change and is acquired through the process of socialization. Thus the objective of this research is to deconstruct the gender identities of children that are constructed by the socializing forces that are represented in the selected texts, and thereby to comprehend the assignment and acquisition of gender roles. This research

utilizes feminist and psychoanalytic theories and Charles Cooley's (1902) looking-glass self concept, as relevant to the analysis of identity formation, in addressing the question as to how the selected texts portray the constructions of gender identities of children within a Sri Lankan context.

### **Methodology**

This paper seeks to deconstruct socially constructed gender identities that are reflected in *Mythil's Secret* by Prashani Rambukwella (2009), *Paduma Meets the Sunbird* by Nihal de Silva (2006), and *Mona's Mission Impossible* by Razana Sameem (2009). These novels were published by the Perera Hussein Publishing House<sup>4</sup> and are available at book stores in Sri Lanka and, more importantly, are included in libraries and used as prescriptive texts in the syllabi of schools<sup>5</sup>, thereby indicating that while a culture of reading Sri Lankan books in English is promoted within these schools, educationists are also convinced that these texts are of a high standard.

Personal interviews were carried out with approximately 30 children from different schools<sup>6</sup> and the goal of the discussions was to gauge if children were receptive to the books that were included in the research, and also to determine their understanding of the texts. Interviews were also carried out with Sri Lankans who have published stories/novels for children (Sybil Wettasinghe, Neluka Silva, Lal Medawattegedara), the authors of the texts included in the study (Prashani Rambukwella and Razana Sameem) and the publisher (Ameena Hussein)<sup>7</sup>, and their valuable input enhanced the progression of this study.

While in discussion with the children's writers, it was evident that there was a vacuum in children's writing in English in Sri Lanka particularly for pre and early teenagers as Prashani Rambukwella shared, "I wanted to write a book for Sri Lankan children because when I was growing up there seemed to be a sad dearth of books written in English for Sri Lankan kids"<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, this study which recognizes the efforts of the authors and publisher<sup>9</sup> to address a void in English literature in Sri Lanka for pre and early teenagers, also attempts to address the gap in research conducted in this particular field.

### ***Primary Sources and Gender Identity***

Prashani Rambukwella (2009) won the Gratiaen award in 2009 for her *Mythil's Secret*<sup>10</sup>, a story which primarily consists of Sri Lankan myths and folklore and focuses on a family from an Anglicized background<sup>11</sup> where the child protagonist encounters various adventures during his stay with his grandmother. In MS, Mythil, the child protagonist, reveals definite signs of heroism as he rescues Asiri, the feeble demon, from the evil demon, Bhishani. Mythil seems to have come a long way from being a timid, introverted boy<sup>12</sup> to standing up for what he believes irrespective of the consequences<sup>13</sup>. Thus Mythil is provided adequate space within the context of the story to grow and mature as a character who is eventually viewed as a hero.

Bagchi (2009: 172) defines the “rite of passage” as the development of the child protagonist in the novel who comes to terms with “the strangeness and magic of life”. The depiction of the hero and the heroine in children’s literature is explored by Butts (1996: 332) as he unearths the origins of adventure stories and discusses the importance of gender divisions particularly in the nineteenth century, which was dominated by male values where girls were often either excluded or assigned minor roles in adventure stories. In MS, when Mythil is introduced to a girl called Ianthi, he is initially impressed by her as “she was different from other girls” (p. 64). Unconsciously, Mythil is stereotyping “other” girls, who unlike Ianthi, wouldn’t enter musty sheds or would cry when they were hurt (p. 65). However, he identifies Ianthi as the girl who wore “posh clothes for the house” since “girls did that” and thus before long Ianthi is pushed into the category of “other girls”, as “she was on the side of the adults” (p. 57). Therefore, in an instance, within the childlike framework of his mind, Mythil defines himself in opposition to Ianthi and perceives her as the “other”.

Simone de Beauvoir while agreeing with psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s perspective on identity formation; that just as we see individuals as “the other” we ourselves are seen by them as “the other” since relationships are marked by a fundamental contradiction as “the subject can be posed only in being opposed”, also adds that in the binary of men/women, this “reciprocity of Otherness is not recognized” (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004: 14). Therefore, it is clear that Mythil defines himself based on his understanding of Ianthi as the “other” and thus is provided the opportunity of starring as the sole hero of the story.

Razana Sameem’s (2009) *Mona’s Mission Impossible*<sup>14</sup>, is set in the coastal areas of Sri Lanka, and is woven around the adventures of a young girl, who comes from a middle-class background<sup>15</sup>, and faces numerous challenges in her determined efforts to save her father. In *MMI*, Mona proves herself to be both adventurous and daring and is accompanied by the alien Jo-aag in her journey, as Butts (1996: 331) asserts “the hero often acquires a faithful companion”. However, as the story progresses Jo-aag’s masculinity is established “nothing to beat a man taking charge, thought Mona,

impressed with Jo-aag and trusting him” (p. 88). Similarly, before they step into the submarine, Jo-aag establishes himself as the leader by posing the question, “alright Mona, are you ready for the adventure of your life?” while his “deep masculine voice” emphasizes his authoritative role (p. 97).

Ms. Sameem, the author of *MMI*, is convinced that the bond between Mona and Jo-aag emphasizes the strength of their relationship. However, the evidence in the text may prove that his presence overshadows Mona as she is impressed by “what a hero Jo-aag was” (p. 128). Thus Mona in *MMI*, due to the presence of Jo-aag, is to a great extent denied the progression and positive character development that Mythil in *MS* experiences. This highlights what Paul (1996: 102) identifies as “male-order heroism”, where the male is portrayed undeniably as the hero, which is an influence of the Victorian period in which young boys were encouraged to carry on the imperial project.

According to *Reading Children—Essays on Children’s Literature*, children’s literature becomes “obsessed with defining appropriate gender roles for its young citizens” with boys’ adventure stories attempting to imprint upon young minds the “image of the dashing, intrepid hero”, while girls are presented with idealized “domestic, caring and nurturing roles” (Chaterjee & Gupta, 2009: 04). Therefore, the portrayals of the hero and the heroine in the stories are also implications of the gender roles the children are expected to perform at a larger level in society.

In the different stories selected for this research, the child protagonists represent diverse social backgrounds, and their understanding of heroism is based on the context from which they emerge. While Mythil in *MS* defines bravery based on the stories he has heard about Saradiel, a legendary figure who was considered the Robin Hood of Sri Lanka, and Mona in *MMI* attempts to prove her heroism by rescuing her father, the child protagonist in *Paduma Meets the Sunbird* unassumingly and unintentionally, repeatedly comes off as the hero in the daily activities in which he is involved.<sup>16</sup> Nihal de Silva (2006)<sup>17</sup>, centers his *Paduma Meets the Sunbird*<sup>18</sup>, on a mischievous young boy from a Sri Lankan village milieu.

In *PMtS* Paduma is generally elected as the leader by his friends<sup>19</sup>, in *MS* Mythil outshines Ianthi and Asiri and in *MMI* Mona is overshadowed by Jo-aag, thereby clearly indicating that “masculinities are understood as a form of power relation, both among men themselves and between men and women” within the gender hierarchy, (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004: 82). Thus the heroes and heroines in the texts thrive on the gender hierarchies that exist in the social and cultural dynamics of society through which gender roles are defined and thereby the gender identities of the children are constructed.

## ***Gender Roles***

Socialization “features in explanations of gender difference, where emphasis is given to the process of how individuals learn to become masculine or feminine” and thus “socially acquire their gender identity” (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004: 160) is relevant to this analysis. In *MS*, Mythil is anxious that his ability to recognize yakas (demons) might intensify the strained relationship between his parents, as “he didn’t want Thaththi to tell Ammi that she had brought Mythil up badly” nor did he want his mother accusing his father of “setting a bad example” (p. 78). This reveals that Mythil is aware of the distinctively different roles his parents play in their family which contributes to his own understanding of gender difference and thereby gender roles. This is further emphasized in the seemingly insignificant incident where his grandmother’s rationale behind teaching Mythil to choose a pumpkin is so that his wife would be proud of him someday when he buys vegetables for the house (p. 24). Unconsciously or otherwise, Mythil’s masculine role in the future is being defined by the ideologies that are upheld and promoted by society and the culture in which he lives.

According to Charles Cooley’s looking-glass self theory, persons get feedback from others across situations and this feedback becomes a mirror or “looking glass”, a reflection of themselves through which their identities are constructed (Burke & Stats 2009: 185). This is vividly demonstrated in *PMtS*, in an incident which takes place in the school, where Paduma is penalized and publicly humiliated when he is forced to sweep the class, an act he has often seen Prema, his sister, doing at home<sup>20</sup>. The insults hurled at him are proof that his classmates derive humour from an action which is perhaps associated with females. Therefore, the taunts “very pretty” “just like a girl” and references to the “dress” and “earrings” reveal that children instinctively associate the act of sweeping with a female (p. 14). These incidents extracted from *MS* and *PMtS* shed light on a process of socialization which focuses on role learning theory with its acquisition of social roles as “children themselves begin to internalise appropriate behavioural norms and characteristics, and thereby unconsciously regulate their own behaviour, in line with the masculine or feminine roles into which they are socialized” (Pilcher & Wheleman, 2004: 161). Therefore, it is evident that irrespective of the social background of the individuals, be it urban or rural, children absorb the masculine and feminine roles that are endorsed by diverse socializing forces that influence the construction of gender identities. In Simone de Beauvoir’s words, ‘women are not born, they are made’ and ‘the same is true of men’ and ‘the making of a man or a woman is a never-ending process that begins before birth’ (cited in Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003: 13).

MacLeod (1994: 04) explores the roles played by women and utilizes the historical novel for children, *Caddie Woodlawn* by Carol Brink (1935), to depict the manner in which young girls were restrained and groomed for what is referred to as “women’s

work” within a mid-nineteenth century concept of what is known as a “woman’s sphere”. Malathi de Alwis (1994: 86) draws attention to the Sri Lankan context and its historical significance in formulating the notion of “domesticating the Sinhala woman”. Drawing from Partha Chatterjee’s argument on Indian nationalism during the colonial period, on the “ideologically powerful dichotomy of the feminized interior (home) and the masculinized exterior (world)”, de Alwis links women with domesticity and the “private” world (p. 87).

This dichotomy of the private and the public is woven into the texts as the children function based on their understanding of the roles performed by adults. As sweeping isn’t considered “masculine” for Paduma in *PMtS* and cooking is a necessity for Mythil only in the absence of a wife in *MS*, it is evident that the male child protagonists in the texts are aware of the domesticated roles that they should refrain from performing. In *PMtS*, while Seeta, Preethi and Saro, Paduma’s classmates, have equal access to education, Kumari, Paduma’s older sister, who is probably educated like the other girls in the village, does not engage in any form of income-earning activity and the future of her family depends on the prospect of marrying her into a wealthy family (p. 267).

de Alwis (1994), follows the traces of colonialism, where women received education through following courses on domestic science which homogenized the notion of “domesticity” in Sri Lanka and finally culminated into what de Alwis defines as a construction of a “domestic identity” which is a result of the demarcated space of the feminized interior that is often viewed as the private space to which a woman is confined.

However, interestingly, the women who play significant roles in the texts included in the study are often depicted as females who face trying circumstances, and yet possess the strength to sustain their families, albeit within the confines of their homes. In *MS*, Mythil is deeply attached to his grandmother whose husband “had died of a heart attack when Mythil’s mother was still a young girl and Archchi had brought up her children on her own” (p. 21)<sup>21</sup>. Likewise, towards the latter part of the story, Mythil’s mother is prepared to take on the role of looking after Mythil on her own once his father leaves for Hong Kong (p. 128). In *PMtS*, Paduma’s mother, is “forced to pawn her gold bangles when Paduma’s father Sediris was arrested” (p. 84), and despite being economically backward, ensures that her children are well educated<sup>22</sup> and does everything in her power to find her daughter a wealthy groom<sup>23</sup>. The role played by Manika in *PMtS* and Archchi and Mythil’s mother in *MS* are perhaps a subversion of seemingly restrictive roles in society, and the authors cleverly depict the manner in which these females, who represent diversified Sri Lankan backgrounds, manipulate their “feminized interiors” in their efforts to ensure the well-being of their families.

While highlighting the importance of depicting divorced and single-parent families, Wilma Pyle (1976: 118) also emphasizes the need for girls to be exposed to women in their literature who have earned the right to be identified through accomplishments of their own. In *MMI*, Mona, witnesses her mother's determined efforts and repeated attempts to ensure the stability of the family, despite her step-father's distasteful attitude towards Mona (p. 13). Thus, it is clear that an attempt is made to portray strong female characters from diverse Sri Lankan social strata that act as positive influences on children whose gender identities are constantly under construction as they assimilate the roles played by independent, self-sufficient women.

### ***Socially Constructed Gender Identities***

Thus the deconstruction of the social constructions of gender identities portrayed within the texts clearly depicts the manner in which gender identities of children are constantly subject to change due to the socializing forces that are active within a particular community. Though perhaps only a limited audience appreciates literature written in English in Sri Lanka, this research recognizes the importance and value of relating to this particular readership and appreciates the development of an indigenous form of literature that represents the social diversity of communities in terms of the construction of gender identities of children within Sri Lanka.

Thus, through focusing on the process of socialization and thereby the portrayal of the hero and heroine, the demarcations of the private and the public, the concepts of masculinity and femininity and the influence of autonomous adults in *Mythil's Secret*, *Mona's Mission Impossible* and *Paduma Meets the Sunbird*, it has been made clear that the respective authors reflect the acquisition and performance of gender roles and thereby the socially constructed gender identities that are constantly molded and defined within a Sri Lankan context.



## End Notes

- 4 A publishing house founded in 2003 by Ameena Hussein and Sam Perera. The children's stories are published under 'Popsicle Books' and 'Bay Owl Press' which are imprints of the Perera Hussein Publishing House.
- 5 St. Thomas' College Mount Lavinia, Alethea International School, Harrow international etc.
- 6 Logos College, St. Thomas' Mount Lavinia, St. Thomas' Preparatory school, Methodist College, Royal College, British School, Asian International and Harrow International (From grades 7 – 11).
- 7 Ameena Hussein's book *Zillij* won the State Literary Prize in 2005.
- 8 Personal communication, August 2, 2010.
- 9 "Books by Sri Lankan authors that are not contextualized in Sri Lanka and are about places with which are unfamiliar to our children irritate me" (A. Hussein, personal communication, August 11, 2010).
- 10 Hereafter, *Mythil's Secret* will be referred to as MS.
- 11 P. Rambukwella, personal communication, August 2, 2010.
- 12 When Mythil first encounters Bhishani in the antique shop with 'intricately carved ornaments' he is terrified of her (p. 27).
- 13 When he saw how Bhishani was torturing Asiri, "Something like anger stirred inside him.. No one deserves to be bullied and frightened just because they are small or weak. It is time to stand up and fight" (p. 137).
- 14 Hereafter, *Mona's Mission Impossible* will be referred to as MMI.
- 15 R. Sameem, personal communication, August 20, 2010.
- 16 This is evident in the way he exposes Josa's (the shop keeper's) gambling party to the police (p. 166), discovers the truth behind the camel jockeys (p. 154) and paves the way for his sister's marriage (p. 270).
- 17 Winner of the Gratiaen award in 2003 for his *The Road from Elephant Pass*.
- 18 Hereafter, *Paduma Meets the Sunbird* will be referred to as PMtS.
- 19 For example, when the children were lost in Sri Pada, Paduma's friends, Mahi Banda and Bothalay, seek refuge in him, "once again the boys look to Paduma for guidance and he doesn't let them down" (p. 132).
- 20 When they are at home Paduma is sent out to buy bread, while Prema "is sweeping the garden", and Kumari his other sister "is seated on the bench combing her hair" (p. 31).
- 21 The incident Archchi relates to Mythil regarding the robber she chased with a gun in the absence of her husband further demonstrates her ability to protect her family (p. 20).
- 22 Paduma's mother, is severely disappointed when the principal initially refuses to let him sit the exam (p. 279).
- 23 "Josa the shopkeeper lends Manika money to buy four plastic chairs" and "there is a new curtain across the main door" in preparation of the arrival of the groom (pp 267 -268).

## *References*

- Bagchi, B. (2009). Cheery children, growing girls and developing young adults: On reading, growing and hopscotching across categories. In R. Chatterjee, & N. Gupta (Eds). *Reading children- Essays on children's literature*. (pp. 163-181). New Delhi: Orient Black Swan.
- Burke, P., & Stets, Jan (2009). *Identity theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Butts, D. (1996). Shaping Boyhood: Empire Builders and Adventures. In Peter Hunt (Ed.), *International companion- Encyclopedia of children's literature*. (pp. 326-331). London: Routledge.
- Chatterjee, R., & Gupta, N. (Eds). (2009). Introduction. *Reading children- Essays on children's literature*. New Delhi: Orient Black Swan.
- Cooley, C.H. (1902). *Human nature and the social order*. New York: Scibner.
- Corse, S. (1997). *Nationalism and literature: The politics of culture in Canada and the United States*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- de Alwis, Malathi. (1994). Towards a feminist historiography: Reading gender in the text of the nation. In R. Coomaraswamy & N. Wickramasinghe (Eds.), *Introduction to social theory*. (pp. 86-103). Sri Lanka: Konark Publishers.
- de Silva, Nihal. (2006). *Paduma Meets the Sunbird*. Sri Lanka: Popsicle Books.
- Eckert, P., & McConnell-Ginet, S. (2003). *Language and gender*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hunt, Peter (Ed.). (2001). *Children's literature: An anthology 1801 – 1902*. Great Britain: Blackwell Publishers.
- MacLeod, A. (1994). *American childhood: Essays on children's literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries*. Georgia: University of Georgia Press.
- Paul, L. (1996). Feminist criticism: From sex-role stereotyping to subjectivity. In Peter Hunt (Ed.), *International companion- Encyclopedia of children's literature*. (pp. 101 – 110). London: Routledge.

Pilcher, J., & Whelehan, I. (2004). *Fifty key concepts in gender studies*. London: SAGE Publications.

Pyle, W. (1976). Sexism in children's literature. *Theory into practice-The early and middle childhood years of schooling*, 15 (2), 116-119.

Rambukwella, P. (2009). *Mythil's secret*. Sri Lanka: Popsicle Books.

Reynolds, K. (1994). *Children's Literature- In the 1890s and the 1990s*. United Kingdom: Northcote House Publishers.

Sameem, S.R. (2009). *Mona's mission impossible*. Sri Lanka: Bay Owl Press.

Singer, D., & Singer, J. (2001). *Handbook of children and the media*. USA: Sage Publications.