

How Gender is Stereotyped in Children's Story "Watashi wa Oneesan" in Japanese Language Textbook for 2nd-Grader Elementary School

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Abstract. Children's literature has always been a vehicle for transmitting values to young readers, including gender stereotypes. As nothing in education is neutral, including the text used with students, this study aims to identify how gender is stereotyped in Ishii Mutsumi's children's story "Watashi wa Oneesan", found in the Japanese language textbook *Kokugo* for 2nd-graders in elementary school. This literary criticism research uses qualitative methods with a feminist perspective. Data in words, phrase, speeches, events, and illustrations of the main character's actions were then analyzed using the content analysis techniques with a feminist perspective to conclude. By analyzing the main character, gender stereotypes in the story are found. Those stereotypes relate to occupational segregation, family responsibilities, and other gender stereotypes. By disclosing the gender stereotypes in "Watashi wa Oneesan", it is clear that in this story, 2nd-grader elementary school students were taught, explicitly and implicitly, how to act, speak, and choose things based on their gender. Therefore, it is crucial to minimize gender stereotypes and establish equitable gender norms and attitudes in early childhood so that children can learn how to act, speak, and choose wisely as human beings.

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1 Introduction

Children are molded into the people they will become as adults from a very early age. As part of the socialization process, they adopt specific roles and behaviors. In their study about changes in sex-role stereotyping in picture books for kids, Allens and Sigler stated that Children start developing their own identities, and one factor that shapes these identities is the literature that children read or are read to [1]. Children's literature generally refers to books written for children and young adults. Early learners can relate to the characters and events and then analyze how they feel, believe, and act [2], which is now commonly used in classrooms [3].

Children's literature has always been a vehicle for transmitting values to young readers, including gender. Gender roles are an integral element of culture, but they can vary significantly from one country to another. People must be aware of these variations and not just accept stereotypes because, in every society, gender stereotypes can be simplified as "what a masculine man and a feminine woman should look and act". Through children's literature and related activities, gender attitudes among children could be influenced [4]. Because books that promote gender bias or sexist portrayals may negatively affect both boys and girls, picture books also impact how children identify their gender [5]. For instance, gender-specific stereotypes of occupations may influence girls to choose more stereotypically female occupations. Young women may find themselves in subordinate roles as a result of this.

Gender stereotypes can be understood through the mechanism of sexism. Sexism is a term that describes various behaviors that encourage the marginalization, oppression, or discrimination of individuals or groups based on sex. The degree to which one gender is portrayed as the primary character in children's books and how that gender is portrayed can indicate gender bias [6]. Boys and girls are often presented with stereotypical gender-role in children's books. Typically, girls are portrayed as naive, obedient, sweet, and reliant. Male characters, on the other hand, are typically combative, physically powerful, adventurous, and capable of acting on their own. Mermelstein added more traits to this; girls typically play more submissive roles as caregivers, mothers, princesses who need saving, and characters that serve the male figure, whereas boys typically play fighters, adventurers, and rescuers [7]. In their study about gender representation in children's books, Casey, Novick, and Lourenco stated that although female representation in novels has increased over the past 60 years, parity has not yet been reached among all genres or authors. Moreover, perhaps surprisingly, the determinants of gender representation, which included

author gender, target audience, character type, and book genre, were unchanged over this period [8].

Some researchers note a more significant focus on male characters in children's literature, including in the title of stories or books for children [7]. However, some stories or books indicate female characters in their titles, like "Watashi wa Oneesan" or "I am the Older Sister", one of the stories in the Japanese language textbook *Kokugo* for 2nd graders in elementary school [9]. This story tells about a newly become 2nd-grader elementary school girl named Sumire who is in charge of watering the plants in her yard and helping to care for her two-year-old sister. Their mother is shown as a figure who reminds Sumire of her student obligations: studying and doing homework. This mother figure appears in only one sentence, while their father figure does not appear in the story set in the Sumire family home.

In her master's thesis, Christine Nebbia stated that nothing in education is neutral, including the texts used with students [10]. Hence, as an example of a 2nd graders elementary school textbook's children's story with female characters in the title, "Watashi wa Oneesan" [11] could portray gender bias and stereotypical gender-role. Moreover, this story has been and maybe will still be read by elementary school students in Japan, so that it may affect the gender attitudes among students. Therefore, this study aims to disclose how gender is stereotyped in Ishii Mutsumi's children's story entitled "Watashi wa Oneesan", found in the Japanese language textbook *Kokugo* for 2nd graders in elementary school.

2 Method

This literary criticism research uses qualitative methods with a feminist perspective. Data were collected using the close-reading technique by identifying and classifying the gender roles and stereotypes in "Watashi wa Oneesan". Those data were in the form of words, phrases, speeches, events, and illustrations related to the actions of the main character Sumire. While data collection uses the close-reading technique, data analysis uses the content analysis technique with a feminist perspective to conclude.

3 Result and Discussion

By analyzing the main character named Sumire, gender stereotypes in the children's story "Watashi wa Oneesan" is found. Those stereotypes relate to occupational segregation, family responsibilities, and other gender stereotypes, as discussed below.

3.1 Gender stereotypes relate to occupational segregation

There exists a stereotype that considers women are generally less competent than men. Women's competence must be proved, while men are taken for granted [12]. These occupational stereotypes also have ramifications for valuing occupations; men for typically male-dominated jobs and women for typically female-dominated jobs. These occupational stereotypes added to the dichotomy of places where men and women should be; men identify with the public sphere, working and doing things remotely from their house, while women identify with the domestic sphere. Children are entitled to a full-time parent whose life is organized around caregiving, and that is a mother [13]. Therefore, the absence of the father of Sumire's family in the story is probably because the father is a man who, by his sex, is identified with the public sphere, not inside the house, which can be identified as the domestic sphere with house chores and childcare as its primary job.

3.2 Gender stereotypes relate to family responsibilities

In many societies, people assume that most of them will eventually have a family, together with the internalization of the notion that men should be "breadwinners" within families. At the same time, women should be responsible for domestic chores and childcare, as they are the caregivers [12]. In short, gender stereotypes prescribe that women's primary role should

be family caregivers, shown in the story by Sumire's acts and her mother's reminder. As an older sister, Sumire has responsibilities to help her mother do house chores and care for two-year-old Karin. In the story, Sumire is depicted as a responsible child and a student because she never misses watering the flower, caring for her little sister, and studying and doing the school's homework, as shown in the quotations below.

「そうだ、コスモスにお水をやらなくちゃ。」と、すみれちゃんは言いました。そして、にわに出て、じょうろで水やりをしました。(Watashi wa Oneesan, p. 59)

"Yes, I have to water the cosmos," said Sumire. And then she went out to the yard and watered the cosmos with a watering can.

それから、ふたりでたくさんわらってわらって、わらいおわると、すみれちゃんは言いました。「じゃあ、かりん。こんどはねえねがおべんきょうするから、ちょっとどいてね。」「いいよ。」かりんちゃんがいすから下りて、そのいすにすみれちゃんがすわりました。(Watashi wa Oneesan, pp. 64-

65)

After that, the two of them laughed and laughed a lot, and when the laughing ended, Sumire said. "Well then, Karin. Your sister will study now, so please move away from the chair". "Okay". Karin then gets down from the chair, and Sumire sits there.

In the second quotation, Sumire asked Karin to move because Karin sat on Sumire's chair and doodled in her notebook. When Sumire discovered that Karin had doodled the cosmos she was watering before, even though it hardly looked like the cosmos, she laughed it out loud, making Karin laugh, too. Thus, in this scene, Sumire shows the role of the family caregiver by watering the flowers and caring for her little sister. As for their mother, she also shows the role of the family caregiver by acting as a mother, although she is shown only as a figure who reminds Sumire of her obligations as a student: studying and doing homework, as shown in the quotations below.

そして、えらいおねえさんになって、りっぱなことをしたくなりました。「そう だ。」と、すみれちゃんは言いました。それから心の中で、「えらいおねえさん は、朝のうちにしゅくだいをするんだわ。」と言いました。同じことをおかあさんに言われると、あまりいい気もちはしません。けれど、自分から思ったときは、すごくいい気もちです。(Watashi wa Oneesan, pp. 56–57)

Sumire wanted to become a great big sister and do something worthwhile. "Yes", said Sumire. Then she talks to herself, "A great sister has her school's homework done by morning". She does not feel good when her mother tells her the same thing. However, when it came from herself, it felt terrific.

The mother here is shown merely as a marginalized supporting female role. She did not speak directly nor appear physically in the story. She was demeaning as a mother's representative, although wives/mothers in Japan typically do 90% of house chores and childcare [13]. In short, the mother here has undergone trivialization as a part of symbolic annihilation [14].

3.3 Other gender stereotypes

Not only traits or acts, people often identify and normalize someone's sex/gender by what he/she is wearing. In these gendered clothes, women are synonymous with dresses as a conventional feminine form, as men with trousers are what people usually take. So is the case with Sumire and her little sister Karin. In every illustration where they appear, they wear cute dresses; Sumire wears a purple dress, while

Karin wears an orange-yellow dress (Watashi wa Oneesan, pp. 55-65). Still related to the illustrations, we can also see the gendered colors and gendered toys. The cosmos flowers Sumire was watering were pink colored, which identified as women/girls' color (Watashi wa Oneesan, pp. 58-59, 62-63). Furthermore, in the last illustration, Karin plays with a cream-colored rabbit plushie wearing a pink dress (Watashi wa Oneesan, p. 65).

Stereotypical gender-role in children's books usually portrays girls as sweet, naive, conforming, and dependent. As mothers, princesses needing saving, caregivers, and characters who stand by the male figure, girls typically play more submissive roles. Besides those traits, Minami added one trait, especially for "good children": negative emotions were not dealt with and were described as being resolved by repression [15]. This trait Minami adds aligns with sweet, conforming, caretaker girls' stereotypes. If we associate this trait with Sumire, these can be interpreted as sending an implicit message that it is not good to express negative emotions as they are and that it is good to be a "good girl" for others, as shown in the quotation below.

出しっぱなしのすみれちゃんのノートに、二さいになった妹のかりんちゃんが、えんぴつで、何かをかきはじめたのです。すみれちゃんが水やりからもどってくる と、かりんちゃんは、まだかいているちゆうでした。すみれちゃんはおどろいて、「かりん、何してるの。」とききました。「おべんきよ。」と、かりんちゃんと言いました。「もう、かりんたら、もう。」と、すみれちゃんは言いました。半分ぐらい、なきそうでした。もう半分は、おこりそうでした。(Watashi wa Oneesan, pp. 60-61).

In Sumire's notebook, which was left out, her younger sister Karin, who turned 2, started drawing something with a pencil. Karin was still drawing when Sumire came back from watering the flowers. Surprised, Sumire asked, "What are you doing, Karin?" "Studying," said Karin. "Enough, Karin, enough," Sumire said. She was about half crying. The other half was angry.

4 Conclusion

By disclosing the gender stereotypes in the children's story "Watashi wa Oneesan", it is clear that in this story, 2nd-grader elementary school students were taught, explicitly and implicitly, how to act, speak, and choose things based on their gender. There are no gender-neutral acts, speeches, or choices in this story. Therefore, it is crucial to minimize gender stereotypes and establish equitable gender norms and attitudes in early childhood so that children can learn how to act, speak, and choose

wisely as human beings.

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