

Space and Place in Selected Dr. Seuss Children's Book (*Horton Hatches the Egg*)

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Abstract:

Despite current applause for gender equality, children seem to be as stereotypically sex-typed as those of yesteryear. (Joannie M. Schrof)

*Literature plays a central role in constructing gender roles and largely is composed to present the image of the girl and the boy as growing up having certain roles and facing different expectations. The present paper is associated with the literary representation of gender discrimination in *Horton Hatches the Egg* as a critical book to Dr. Seuss's legacy which was released in 1940. Generally, male is dominant in Dr. Seuss children's books, so full preference is given to him. While discussing the ideological process of gender construction in literature, it's necessary to study the dominated images of women in literary work. Therefore, this paper is aimed at determining the difference in gender role models for females and males in children's books.*

Key words: Horton Hatches the Egg, Gender role, Mayzie, Horton, Motherhood, Children's Literature, Dr.Seuss

Introduction

Debates over motherhood have been one of the fundamental components which orient American feminist movements. In this

context, the issues for feminism are numerous. Feminists criticize the issues which reinforce patriarchal attitudes in relation to gender related discourses such as motherhood and childrearing.

Feminists oppose the way society defines women and the social practices which promote women's instincts as the motivating force that make women nurturers and automatically responsible as caregivers. Feminists claim that such myths are socially constructed by patriarchy and reinforce social practices that eventually restrict women. Contemporary feminists, particularly, radical feminists have voiced and supported these perspectives, as the base of twenty-first-century feminism movements. The present study is associated with the literary representation of gender discrimination in *Horton Hatches the Egg* as critical book to Dr. Seuss's legacy which was released in 1940. While discussing the ideological process of gender construction in literature, it's necessary to study the dominate images of women in literary work. It's important to examine how women encounter the existing ideologies and practice of patriarchy and gender discrimination.

However, the way in which these various changes in the patriarchal society have been perceived and represented by feminists will be addressed. By the same token, the paper explores how Dr. Seuss responded to this changing scenario.

Are Women Born or Made?

To Penelope Eckert, Sally McConnell-Ginet, "Gender not as given, but as an accomplishment; not simply as cause, but as effect; and not just as individual, but as social" (1). Likewise, Simone de Beauvoir asserts that women are repeatedly told from infancy that they are made for childbearing. While the splendors of maternity are forever being sung to her, the drawbacks of her situation—menstruation, illnesses, and even the boredom of household drudgery—are all justified by this

marvelous privilege she has of bringing children into the world (508-509). Because women were declared made for family, not for public functions (142). Beauvoir indicates that such pervasive socialization has shaped women's desire to choose motherhood over everything else.

Feminists sought to challenge the overemphasis on fertility which was imposed on women, insisting that marriage and childrearing is socially manipulative and provides a way to exclude women from other productive roles. Feminist theorists' attempts have been to debunk the social pattern of motherhood which promotes male control over women's bodies and energy. They argue that such notions create a sphere for male domination.

Besides sexual identity, women are naturally expected to be feminine as they would one day become mothers. Engels argues that "The overthrow of mother right was the world historic defeat of the female sex. The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude; she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children. . . . In order to make certain of the wife's fidelity and therefore the paternity of his children, she is delivered over unconditionally into the power of the husband; if he kills her, he is only exercising his rights." (De Beauvoir 120).

Accordingly, Engels puts forward the explanation as to how women became an oppressed sex, rather than the fact that women are "inferior" because of motherhood and they are bounded by children and husband and that their freedom is exploited by social definitions of femininity and womanhood. Where the sexual division of labor existed in pre-class societies when production for use was the dominant mode of production, no implication of gender inequality could be seen because women were able to combine their reproductive and productive roles. With the rise of class society, when production for exchange began to dominate, the sexual division of labor helped

to remove equality between the sexes. So the household became primarily a space for reproduction.

Moreover Engels asserts that all these types of relationships put women in a low status leading to the rise of class society when women's role was seen as reproductive and one of producing inheritance through motherhood. On the other hand, private property increased man's position in the family rather than that of the woman. As a result men got the power to exploit women and acquire the control of his children.

The second-wave feminists such as Shulamith Firestone argue that motherhood is inherently oppressive. She declares that "women and children are always mentioned in the same breath. The special tie women have with children is recognized by everyone" (The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution 73). The general role of women has been child rearing and child bearing and it is the central oppressive role of women. In this respect, children psychologically learn their defined role regarding relationships. They accept the role as defined for them when they become adults in which the oppression is passed on to the next generation. Nevertheless, to explain the oppression of women and children, it goes to the structure of the family and their roles and responsibilities because children are growing up in nuclear family which is especially a male dominated unit. She suggests that women should take the control of the means of reproduction to get rid of those social constructions based on their reproductive capacities.

Other feminists such as Adrienne Rich, argues that the theoretical meaning of the concept of motherhood is both biological and socially constructed. She believes that there is a special bond between mother and their children. As the same time, she challenges assumptions that childrearing is the sole responsibility of women and argues against "an institution in patriarchy- a female experience that is shaped by male expectations and structures, and virtually unrecorded by

women themselves to date”(Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution 15). For her, biological motherhood is not necessarily oppressive in and of itself. Moreover, biological motherhood is oppressive and restrictive to women because patriarchal societies have inculcated in most women that mothering should be their job.

However, because motherhood is so highly valued in society it doesn't mean it is exclusively a good thing. It is also the root of problems for mothers and the other women. There is often tension between motherhood and expectations under patriarchal society. Motherhood requires pregnancy and birth. Motherhood begins at the moment of conception and continues until the moment of birth. The concept of motherhood is intertwined with the standard conception of the family.

Does Gender matter in *Horton Hatches the Egg*?

Dr. Seuss's attempt is to strengthen the values of males and clarify the existence of men; there is one more sphere that needs the attention, which are boys and girl relationship and their defined gender. Moreover, Children's books are running the risk of creating or strengthening cultural values. Children's books are certainly important in reinforcing gender roles, because children's books are fueled by traditional culture as well as reinforcement of defined gender roles. They are reflection of already-existing traditional cultural values elements, too. What's more, the intimate relationship between boys and girls is absolutely a necessity in the debate as the member of society, but considering boys as a dominant is a big deal. Besides, boy and girls possess the different sex, so the boy duplicates his father's experiences and girl her mother's experiences. Dr. Seuss in *Horton Hatches the Egg* pursues his quest to explain the girls' defined traditional gender roles as mother and even condemn Mayzie rejection who is bored and tired of her gender roles.

This quotation from Mayzie and her confrontation with her roles as being mother brings up the issue that she is not happy with her status;

From sitting, just here day after day.
It's work! How I hate it!
I'd r take vacation, fly off for a rest

At first sight, *Horton Hatches The Egg's* generation broke with tradition. Many critics have examined the elements and rewriting of gender notions in the *Horton Hatches The Egg*. For Frank Taylor, "Dr. Seuss using a coding frame based on traditional gender-role stereotypes "(300). In *Horton Hatches the Egg* as other Dr.Seuss's children's books boys are more highly valued than girls. He describes women as lazy "Mayzie bird" that abandons her responsibility, but steady the Elephant "Horton" as a man to take care of her egg. As Karen Hesse in *Everything I Need to Know I Learned from a Children's Book* inscribes that "I met my first genuine humanitarian in the elephant Horton.... I wanted to be like Horton. I wanted the world to be populated by Hortons. I wanted all the children of the world to be treated with the same loving devotion with which Horton treated the egg (37)".

Dr.Seuss tends to represent the persistence, honor, devotion; all these traits from the character of his hero who is a male "Horton" which is rejected by lazy and selfish Mayzie bird. With perfect attention to detail and scene, children learn from the story what it means to be a boy or girl. It conveys that Dr.Seuss book is sexist and enforces gender inequality. Particularly, the inequalities of women and girls in the twentieth century children's literature that female characters are less valuable and important than male counterparts. Accordingly to Wietzman, "Children's books are a vehicle for presentation of social values to children" (1126). It means that the inappropriate statue of female in dominant defined roles , male dominance and female submission probably inspire children to practice the invisibility and submissive role of

women and girls and to have faith in that women are less important than men and boys, thereby reinforcing the defined gender roles.

Dr. Seuss illustrates how each of us has subconsciously equalized the term femininity with maternity. Mayzie seems to be mother. Mayzie is avant-garde in her adventure. From French point of view, "woman's first duty is to be herself., not a possession" (20). Mayzie is unlike other women of Dr. Seuss children's books. She never sees herself in a traditional mode. As a woman, she never believes in bearing with being devoted to a child in her life; unlike other female characters she is not happy to become mother. Unlike Horton, Mayzie enjoys her independence as a woman rather than be mother. Dr. Seuss portrays the atmosphere in detail while presenting the traditional defined gender roles; for instance she shows that faithful Horton who is a man attempts carefully, tenderly and gently to take Mayzie's responsibility while Mayzie is an indifferent mother "Decided she's NEVER go back to her nest!". Opposing traditional views, Mayzie as a rebel wants to be happy on her own term, she thinks about the meaning of life and "Enjoy the sunshine way off in Palm beach, And having such fun, such a wonderful rest". Apparently, Mayzie as a modern female despite Dr. Seuss female characters has changed her ideas and refuse to live her life like that. This is why I discussed more about the role of her, only to isolate her role of being a woman from the role of being a mother.

The fallacy about motherhood has traditionally developed in which every single female sex is assumed to be destined to become a mother one day and play the role of being mother. For Goss, "Many females felt the only role for them was as a mother. When books present only traditional roles for males and females, children develop very confining views of the world and of their options. When girls are exposed to egalitarian materials they are more likely to broaden their

horizons" (5). That's why, Mayzie after seeing Horton a mother, portrays like;

The old good for nothing bird, runaway Mazyie!
Still on vacation and still just as lazy.

Today, as in the past, it's believed that she ought to have full passion and compassion toward the egg and care for it. Motherhood perhaps is the major issue in *Horton Hatches the Egg*. However, the role of mother does suit Mayzie in the traditional view, but she never devotes herself to the egg. Perhaps it is the social influence that expects Mayzie even as female bird to be more like traditional women. But, she never places herself in the role of mother and regards it as the great achievement in her life. Dr. Seuss illustrates how motherhood is regarded as a must in women's lives. The moral normative for men and women are different, women's judgments are linked to feeling of empathy and compassion while they confront hypothetical dilemmas.

Dr. Seuss pictures the dark depiction of being woman. Its theme, in my opinion, is a crisis in changing defined gender roles. The book houses a range of gender discrimination such as being faithful to defined gender roles. Dr. Seuss has this feminine look that many women would wish to have, but Mayzie behavior drastically stands opposite to her sex. She does not follow any rules that normally people would expect girls to have.

In *Horton Hatches the Egg's* portrayal of Mayzie's character there are two perspectives: first, the women's strong intertwined feeling of being mother and hatred towards the victim, too. In a way, by her independence she is destroying her role as mother. To Mayzie being mother stand for suffocating power and loss of self and her independence represent loss of subjectivity.

Despite all of changes in women's condition women are still oppressed in children's books. Unlike male characters in Dr. Seuss children's book, the portrayal of female characters can

be seen as representative of his opinion of women as submissive, passive and weak. Michael S. Kimmel concurs that in his stories female characters are often represented as senior citizens or offered only selfish or foolish one (710). Likewise, to Alison Lurie , " The most memorable female in his entire oeuvre is the despicable Mayzie, the lazy bird who callously traps Horton into sitting on her egg so that she can fly off to Palm Beach"(75). Whereas the male character; Horton, a faithful the elephant is depicted as "gentlemen and kind". Mayzie as the only rebellious female characters of Dr.Seuss; tries to protest against patriarchal society, against her mother's passivity due to seeing herself as a passive actor in a nest, she feels forced to take part in.

But, even the rebel Mayzie's character does not really stands for positive female figure till the end because she wants to take her roles back " But it's MINE!" screamed the bird , when she heard the egg crack...It's my egg! She sputtered. You stole it from me!". The feminine traits also are there in her.

Horton is a multifaceted male animal. He is teased by his friend for performing Mayzie 's roles which traditionally was considered as women's responsibility. He pictures himself with different types of femininity at times towards other animals around him. In relation to gender stereotypes, it's meaningful to reflect how Dr.Seuss misogyny is obvious. For example in *Gertrude McFuzz*, Dr.Seuss describes poor Gertrude:

She got very jealous. She frowned. And she pouted.
Then one day she got awfully mad and she shouted:
"This just isn't fair! I have one! She has two!
I MUST have a tail just like Lolla-Lee-Lou!

The message that Dr.Seuss's books are giving are practicing gender ideology instead of emulating cultural standard of gender roles which is internalizing through books, in other words he is giving code to children. To Taylor, "Ideological messages about gender are embedded throughout our culture,

and when women and men use them as standards of comparison to make judgments about themselves or about others, we may say that they are "practicing "gender ideology"(301). Children may not even be aware that their perceptions about reality and their place in family and society are constantly structured in an ideological manner.

There are many generic and structural differences between his books. Female characters in his stories rarely dominate the narrative scene, and there are just as many women in the world as men. Mainly his books reinforce the idea that there are limited spaces for women at the top.

Gender stereotypes involving in books as a reflection of what children observe in daily life enhance the characters trait and then perceive to be true. For example, if female characters are constantly portrayed inferior they will be perceived as having inferior qualities which lead to the perception that inferiority is a typical trait of women. Accordingly, the social role of woman as mother turns into a stereotype. As more observations are made of the social roles of males and females in Dr.Seuss children's books, males are perceived as agentic, assertive and intelligent, yet women are selfish, compassionate. Dr.Seuss tends to represent the persistence, honor, devotion; all these traits form the character of his hero who is a male "Horton" which is rejected by lazy and selfish Mayzie bird. He considers women to be responsible for their sexuality. Dr.Seuss often implements everything in the most traditional way against feminist ideas about women.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present paper was pursued to develop a critical engagement with the theme of representation of notion of gender in *Horton Hatches the Egg* by Dr.Seuss. I clarified how woman's character reflects Dr.Seuss attempt to state that women are emotional, unintelligent and submissive. He

pictures the subordination of women. As Shulamith Firestone's argues that the issue of fertility and motherhood is considered as a crucial part of women's lives. Moreover, sexual identity of women are unsurprisingly supposed to be feminine and would one day become mothers. These are misconceptions that are extended by the patriarchy. Judith Butler assumes that "femininity is masquerade" and therefore, women can perform their femininity in ways they desire as Mayzie does at the beginning of the story. Furthermore, "one is not born, but rather than becomes a woman" (Simon De Beauvoir). In the details an attempt has been made to study these crucial issues not only in terms of how they have been traditionally constructed but also in terms of the ways in which how they are still going on especially in children's literature which undermines the perception of women. Also, it expresses the ambivalent attitude of a woman. Then, my attempt was to study the decayed traditional gender belief lead to frustration. To this end, the relationships between the male and female are important. Despite, Dr.Seuss never gives her female characters the ability to be able to represent themselves. Therefore, Dr.Seuss's stories are significant for an understanding of female subordination, place and position. It encourages readers to respect traditional established gender roles. Understandably, his children's books don't represent improvement in the female models, and equal opportunity has not yet been reached. This take place when both sexes have equal amounts of all types of behaviors, activities, and professions.

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