SUBTLE SEXISM IN DADEY AND JONES' ZOMBIES DON'T PLAY SOCCER

Mary Regitha Bellamine, Research Scholar, University of Kerala

Abstract:
Children's literature at the end of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the twenty-first century, though reveals the influence of Third Wave Feminist activism, this influence is only superficial. Despite the increased range of career opportunities and lifestyles available to both sexes today, stereotypes are still present and produce negative connotations and consequences. These stereotypes are still inflicted on children at a very young age via socialization, to which the contribution of children's literature is imperative. The paper titled 'Subtle Sexism in Dadey and Jones' Zombies Don't Play Soccer' makes an analysis of the fifteenth novel of the popular series The Adventures of the Bailey School Kids (1990-2007). The study focuses on the stereotypical portrayal of the boy-protagonist as the 'privileged' hegemonic man which is corollary to the representation of the girl characters as submissive and tangential. It tries to explore the understated sexist discourse embedded within the weaves of the seemingly simple and innocent narrative of the novel.

Key Words: Stereotype, hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity, patriarchal ideology, gender bigotry etc.

According to Anderson and Hamilton, although gender representation in children's literature seems to be improving, “we should be aware that there may be more subtle ways in which the sexes are portrayed stereotypically. Perhaps authors consciously or unconsciously resort to subtle sexism because blatant sexism no longer passes unnoticed” (764). Many of the children's books written during this progressive period, as cultural products manipulated by the dominant patriarchal ideology endorse hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity which certify the subordination of women. Like many other women writers of the period, Debbie Dadey and Marcia Thornton Jones conform to this male-dominated tradition. The Adventures of the Bailey School Kids series (1990-2007), co-authored by Dadey and Jones is popular especially among the elementary school kids.

Debbie Dadey is the author of over 145 children’s books. She was a first grade teacher and librarian before becoming a full-time writer. Marcia Thornton Jones is the author or co-author of over 135 children’s elementary chapter books, series, picture books etc. She was an elementary school teacher of first and third grades. She has been a full-time writer since 1990. The Bailey School Kids is a series of children's books which revolve around a group of recurring characters- Eddie, Howie, Melody and Liza- and their adventures. Howie is a friend to Liza, Eddie and Melody. He is the most logical, brave and intelligent of the group. Eddie is the tough guy of the group, and usually makes fun of his friends for believing stupid things. Liza is the most compassionate and sensitive of the group, usually not wanting to resort to methods that will result in others being hurt, even if they are monsters. Melody is a close friend of Liza. Zombies Don't Play Soccer is the fifteenth book in the series which consists of more than fifty books.

Dadey and Jones like Blyton endorse the conventional stereotypes in their choice of the male leader, Eddie in the series. At the very outset of the novel itself, Eddie is introduced as the centre of attention. His childish pranks are bestowed with a heroic status. In chapter 1, it is narrated in a positive light, how he gets rid of their previous coach, who was not that efficient to back up the Bailey Boomers to win the soccer. Melody lauds Eddie for his witty deed:
'Coach Ellison probably gave up soccer for good after what you did to him last week,' Melody said as she came on to the field and kicked the ball back to Eddie. 'What did I do?' Eddie asked innocently. Howie sat down to put on his shin guards and looked at Eddie. 'Don't you remember putting vinegar in his water bottle?' Howie asked ... 'I remember,' Eddie said, laughing and kicking the ball at the same time, 'Coach Ellison's face looked like a sick pug dog. He spit that vinegar at least fifteen feet. He must have set a world's record for distance spitting.'(3)

Eddie can be classified to the group of “manly” boy characters in the traditional novels who carried their well-developed sense of fun and adventure into the adult world and used it to punish all those who were foolish or ineffectual. His dominance is also exposed in his frequent chases after the girls. This is exemplified in chapter 2, where Liza expresses her disappointment with the new coach and she attributes the blame on Eddie:

'Well, Liza panted when they were away from the coach. 'I hope you're happy, Eddie. This new coach is your fault,’... Eddie giggled and made his arms and legs stiff. Then he started coming after Liza... Eddie was too busy chasing Liza. Liza shrieked and raced across the empty field.(11) The steadfast and buoyant spirit of the heroic male leader is much evident in Eddie's optimistic words that “anything is possible” and is fairly illustrated in chapter 3, where Eddie motivates the other members in the group:

Liza rubbed her legs and groaned. 'I think I'd rather lose than suffer like this.' 'It'll be worth it, if we win a few games,' Melody told her. 'A few games?' Eddie shouted. 'With this kind of practicing, we're going to beat every team in the state, even the Sheldon Shooters!' Howie, Liza and Melody smiled. The Sheldon Shooters were the best soccer team around. Every year they won game after game.

'Do you really think we stand a chance against the Shooters?' Liza asked.

'Sure,' Eddie said. 'The Bailey Boomers will be number one!'(13-4)

Dadey and Jones depict the weak physique of the girls as a foil to the sturdy masculine body. The reference to Liza using a muscular ointment as a preparation to play soccer and Melody's agreement to that is fairly illustrative:

'Phe-eew!' Eddie squealed through a pinched nose. 'You smell like a dead skunk!' Liza put her hands on her hips and glared at Eddie. 'I'm ready for a killer soccer practice. Mom let me use some muscle ointment.' 'I wish I'd thought of that,' Melody said as they headed for the soccer field on the other side of the playground. (21)

Furthermore, the display of boys' knowledge and reason are depicted in sharp contrast to girls' ignorance. In chapter 6, entitled “Huddle” this is very much evident in the conversation among the children on zombies:

Melody rolled her eyes. 'Must I tell you everything? That old lady put a spell on the coach and turned her into a zombie!' Eddie grabbed Melody's arms and shook her. 'I think you're the zombie and your brains have taken a permanent vacation.' 'Eddie's right,' Liza giggled. 'Afterall, zombies don't play soccer.' 'Besides,' Howie added, 'there is no such thing as zombies.'

Literary Endeavour (ISSN 0976-299X) : Vol. X : Issue: 1 (January, 2019)
Eddie nodded. 'Zombies are just made-up creatures in the movies.' (30) Further in chapter 10, Eddie mocks at Melody for mistaking Coach Graves for a zombie: 'Your brain must have turned to peanut butter overnight.' Eddie giggled. 'There isn't anything wrong with Coach Graves'" (52). Eddie is portrayed as, at his best, in ridiculing girls' mistakes. This is further exemplified in chapter 11, where Melody tries to cure Coach Graves by giving her peanuts:

'I thought you said peanuts would cure the coach,' Liza whispered.
'My cousin told me salt would do the trick,' Melody sniffed. 'It's the only thing that cures Zombies. I don't know what went wrong!'
'Let me see something,' Howie said. 'Here's the problem,' he told them.
The three friends crowded close to see where Howie pointed. There in big red letters it said Salt Free.
'Smooth move, peanut butterbrain,' Eddie laughed. 'Did you forget how to read?' (56-7)

As illustrated by the novels of Nesbit and Blyton, the stereotypical cast of the "manly" boys' principal attribute is the display of his gallantry, which is also endorsed by Dadey and Jones. Eddie's exhibition of his valor is quite evident when he declares that he "is not afraid of any zombie" and in chapter 6, where he confronts Coach Graves, as challenged by Melody:

Melody pointed to Coach Graves. 'Then you won't mind marching up to her and staring straight in the eyes,'
'Is that a dare?' Eddie asked.
Melody nodded. 'It's a double dare.'

Eddie marched away from his friends without looking back. He knew Liza, Melody and Howie would follow him. Eddie stopped right in front of Coach Graves and stared. The coach looked away. (32)

This demonstration of audacity reaches its culmination in the chapter titled "Cemetery." When Coach Graves throws the team ball into a deep pit, it is Eddie who shows the courage and impetus to jump into the pit in order to take the ball. The scene also exposes the protective and supporting roles of the hegemonic man which are well enacted by Eddie:

'I don't care about that old woman,' Eddie said. 'But I do care about the team ball. I'm going to get it.'
'Are you crazy?' Liza squealed. 'Do you know what the hole is?'
'It's a grave,' Howie said slowly...

Eddie looked into the deep hole.
Eddie looked at his friends, then back into the hole again. He didn't want them to think he was afraid.
'Don't do it,' Liza whimpered.

Eddie stood on the edge of the deep hole. 'Don't be silly,' he told them. He sounded very brave. 'It's just a hole.' Eddie took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Then he jumped.
He landed right beside the soccer ball. 'I've got it,' Eddie said, quickly scooping up the ball. (43-4)

Further, Eddie's highly arrogant nature and mannerisms are apparent in his reply to Huey, one of the members in the team: "She is not a coach," Huey said. 'We should do what the coach says. Whoneeds a coach?' Eddie interrupted. 'Let's just play ball!' Then he bopped the ball out of Huey's hands and kicked it down the field." (58)

Although more recent results of studies have revealed that gender differences in children's literature have decreased considerably toward more sexual equality, with female representation as main characters becoming proportionate to that of male characters, their characterization reinforced traditional sex-role stereotypes, such as passivity (Henderson and Kinman 96). They are still underrepresented, with
regard to the boy characters, and are given a smaller variety of roles. Even though there is an emergence of nontraditional characteristics and nontraditional roles portrayed by females, males still dominate many of the children's books (Macdonald, 88).

The Bailey School Kids series can also be classified into the broad category of children's books which reinforce, legitimate, and reproduce a patriarchal gender system. In the novels, the overtones of gender bias are promulgated effectively and subtly. In Zombies Don't Play Soccer, in chapter 2, Eddie's reaction when he is informed that the new coach is a woman is a manifestation of blatant sexism:

'Oh, no!' Eddie stopped short before they got to the practice area. 'The new coach is a woman!'...

'She probably doesn't know anything about soccer. We'll have to tiptoe around the ball so we don't break her fingernails.' (5)

As V. Geetha, the distinguished feminist and social activist has argued in her work Gender: The idea is that whatever women do or are urged to do, which is different from what Nature or God ostensibly meant them to do, they must be on guard. They cannot and must not risk doing or saying anything which suggests they are un feminine. For to be unfeminine is also to be unnatural. (22)

Further, when Coach Graves reminds Eddie, the necessity of teamwork, he retorts: “I don't need teamwork to win. I don't even need a woman coach!” (9). Later in chapter 3, titled “The New Coach,” he comments: “That lady looks like a reject from an old-time horror movie” (14).

Dadey and Jones unambiguously conform to the patriarchal conventions of the genre by entrusting the boy characters, with vital roles which prove to be the pivots in the novel. The girl characters are either excluded from the scene or depicted in extreme passivity. This aspect is brilliantly delineated in the last chapter which deals with the details of the soccer game. Melody is excluded from the game as her ankle sprains and Liza is almost left out in the game despite her use of the muscle ointment:

Melody fell to the ground and didn't get up. The referee whistled for a free kick. 'Are you all right? Liza asked.

Melody shook her head. 'I think I twisted my ankle.'...

The boomers nodded their heads and helped Melody off the field. In just a few seconds, the Shooters almost scored a goal. Eddie blocked the shot just in time. Howie booted the ball all the way down by the Sheldon goal. Liza was standing there in her position. She was so surprised to see the ball coming her way, she ducked. The ball bounced right off her head and into the goal.

'You did it! We shot down the Shooters!’ Melody screamed just as the referee's whistle signaled the end of the game. (68-9)

The bigotry with regard to gender is also apparent in the characterization of Coach Graves, the principal elder figure in the novel. This is perceptible in Eddie's derogatory comments about her. Even though the depiction of this woman character in the garb of a soccer coach seems to be progressive at the surface level, it is revealed as ironical at a deeper level analysis. She is presented as a passive and ineffectual coach. She is proved to be a failure in her career as she is hesitant to train the children and the dire consequence is that the kids are under the threat of losing the game.

At the end of the novel, it is revealed that the kids win the soccer on their own and without any assistance from the coach. The traditional belief is covertly alluded here, that a woman is not fit for a man's job. Howie's observation is remarkable in this respect: “She looks like my mom after a hard day at work” (46). Women have already been in the public domain with different interests and have found ways to express their needs in the twenty-first century, but the power of the Victorian romantic female images are actually still valid. The female representations for the ideal womanhood still continue to control the perception of the modern woman (Reynolds and Humble, 4-5).

Literary Endeavour (ISSN 0976-299X) : Vol. X : Issue: 1 (January, 2019)
Like many other children’s books, *Zombies Don’t Play Soccer* also provides insight into the social reproduction of gender inequality and the maintenance of the gender system. The patterns of gender representation in the novel work with children’s existing schemas and beliefs about their own sexual identities. The portrayal of unequal mould of males and females thus contributes to and reinforces the maintenance of the status quo with regard to gender.

The dominant discourse and ideology seek to control and regulate individuals by defining the socially and culturally acceptable and appropriate behavior of males and females. In a patriarchal and heteronormative society girls and women, boys and men are expected to fill specific gender-appropriate roles, girls and women fill a more submissive role and participate in domestic and home-based activities, while men and boys dominate, and fill the role of the authority figure responsible for maintaining control.

The social norms and conventions, as determined by the dominant discourse, expect men and women to behave in certain ways. Individuals internalize current social conventions as established by the governing discourses of their society and conform to what is considered normal behavior. Institutions such as religion, literature, education, and family promote consensual control by reinforcing the values and practices of the dominant discourse with regard to dominant perceptions and conventions of gender, and with a view to encourage social order and conformity in line with these. In turn, the practices of sexist discourse becomethought of as normal behavior.

As Kimberley Reynolds suggests, “reading is one way in which the child learns about social organization and what is read can affect how s/he understands himself or herself socially” (38). Wolfgang Iser's article, “Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach” has been considered and used by various scholars as a primary source for understanding and explaining the ways in which language inculcate a certain ideology into the child reader through a gendered juvenile literature. Iser's theory describes the reading process as an interaction between a text and a reader, where the convergence of both as complimentary components brings the literary text into existence for the reader during the reading activity (274).

In his influential book *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*, John Stephens, whose major focuses are on the ideology of text and discourse analysis in children's literature, also refers to Iser's argument that, when reader actively involves in reading and is transformed by means of different subject positions and gaps s/he fills within the text, the reader “leaves her own subjectivity to identify the subjectivity of the fictive character” with “the ideological position of the implied reader” that each text offers to its reader (55).

Children learn to perceive themselves and their cultural roles through fiction, and reading has implications on the acquisition of sexual identity. The concept of fizationalization is crucial to the analysis of subjectivity and ideology in narrative fiction. Stephens contends in *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*, that “children’s fiction belongs firmly within the domain of cultural practices which exist for the purpose of socializing their target audience,” and explains that “because ideology is thus present as an implicit secondary meaning ... fiction must be regarded as a special site for ideological effect, with a potentially powerful capacity for shaping audience attitudes” (8).

Today’s children have the opportunity to read children’s books, mainly fiction, in a wide range of topics and genres, yet literary texts whose messages and ideologies are shaped and constrained by the society in which they are produced by adult writers still have the power “to invite the child reader to become something like the reader they imply as children read them” (Nodelman and Reimer 18). This change in reader occurs through a reading process that introduces texts by which the child reader understands her/his social place and constructs a sexual identity (Reynolds 38). As many children’s literature scholars have noted in analyses of the relationship between literature and the reader’s subjectivity, the power of a text is grounded in an expected transformation likely to occur in the reader through the reading material which marginalizes the child reader not only within but also outside the text.
Every society has institutionalized systems of thought which define socially acceptable behavior and opinions about issues such as gender and race. These systems of thought construct and define the prevailing body of beliefs of a society and, in turn, reflect the values and norms based on these beliefs. Thus, the heteronormative views of a given period that encouraged specific gendered behavior form part of the hegemonic practices of that period. This is revealed in and endorsed by the majority of the literary works produced in that period.

Works Cited