

Portrayal of Gender in the Play: *The Merchant of Venice* and its Effects on Students' Perceptions of Gender Roles

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Abstract

The study on 'The portrayal of gender in *The Merchant of Venice* and its effects on students' perceptions of gender roles' was carried out with the aim to understand how the play influenced students' opinions about gender roles. Although there are numerous research that have investigated the gender stereotypes in the play, there are limited research done on the effect of the play on students. Adopting the constructivist paradigm, the data was collected using semi-structured interviews with 12 students and four teachers. According to the study, the play contains a significant amount of gender stereotypes that have both positive and negative effects on students' perceptions of gender roles. While the students learn about the ill effects of gender disparity and role of women, they shared their discontentment about the portrayal of women as a weaker gender resulting in male students denying to take up the roles of female characters. The study confirms that teachers have a significant role to instill a sense of gender equality among the students, thus recommending the teachers to employ a variety of activities in the class while teaching the play to enhance the perception of gender equality.

Keywords: The Merchant of Venice, gender stereotypes, patriarchy, gender roles, impact

Introduction

Monastic education was a dominant education system in Bhutan until the Western style of Education system was introduced in the late 1950s. Though the official language is Dzongkha, English is also extensively used. In the schools, all the subjects, except the national language (Dzongkha), are taught in English. The Education system comprises six years of primary education and six years of secondary education. The curriculum for the schools is developed by the Royal Education Council [REC] in collaboration with the school teachers.

The curriculum for English as a subject for the higher secondary students was reformed in the year 2017 by replacing the two dramas *Once Upon a Greek Stage* by Beth McMaster in grade 11 and *Episode in the Life of an Author* by Jean Anouilh in grade 12 with *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare. The play portrays various themes such as friendship, greed, generosity, mercy, law and gender roles. Among other themes, the play reflects the theme of gender roles through strong and independent female characters; Portia, Jessica and Nerissa.

There are no major issues of gender inequality in Bhutan. However, patriarchal as well as matriarchal values are still practiced in some parts of the country. Schools are primary institutions where students are expected to learn various values of humanity. The school curriculum is meant to make our youth better human beings and better leaders of the future. The students' perception on gender role depends on the curriculum they study. Thus, school curriculum plays a major role in creating awareness about gender equality.

In the play, female characters are portrayed as courageous, strong and intelligent. However, the most empowering role of the female characters is performed by altering their gender appearance. Ability of women is masked under the guise of men. Caravella (2006) stated that, in the play, female characters accomplish remarkable deeds to clear the 'messes' that their husbands have created only to return to their minor positions as wives. Thus, women are depicted as inferior gender.

Furthermore, there is no available literature regarding the impact of the play on students. Despite the fact that the play deals with gender stereotypes, prejudice, and patriarchal values, no research has been done to see how the play affects students' perceptions of gender roles. There is also limited literature on the play's positive and negative effects on the students.

This qualitative research attempted to find the relationship between the play *The Merchant of Venice* and students' perception on gender roles. The study aimed to understand whether the play has some effects on students' perception of male and female gender roles.

Literature Review

Gender equality is a major concern all over the world. Half of the population of the world is represented by women yet gender inequality perseveres and becomes a barrier to social progress. In Sustainable Development Goals [SDG] (2018), it is stated that as of 2014, 143 countries have guaranteed gender equality in their constitution but 52 countries have not taken the step yet. Hazel and Kleyman (2020) observed that even when the world has taken huge steps towards achieving gender equality, there is still a gap and this gap is seen widening. Education system has a huge role to play in inculcating the value of gender equality among youths. In order to achieve the educational success of youths, schools and educational institutions should have an environment which is free of gender bias.

Gender equality in the education system of Bhutan

In Bhutan, the government ensures gender equality. Article 7: Section 15 of Constitution of Bhutan states, "All persons are equal before the law and are entitled to equal and effective protection of the law and shall not be discriminated against on the grounds of race, sex, language, religion, politics or other status" (p.15). Bhutan provides free and equal opportunities for any level of education for both the genders. Seden and Maxwell (2016) found that while Bhutan made remarkable growth in ensuring female children's access to primary as well as lower secondary level of education, enrolment for higher secondary and tertiary education is relatively low. Low enrolment of female into education can widen the gender gap. Thus, the seeming gender gap needs to be narrowed.

The effect of curriculum on gender discourse

In order to achieve educational success of the students, schools should have an environment which is free of gender bias. The curriculum that students study can affect their perception of gender role. According to Wissman (2008), students' practices inside and outside classrooms are related to the discourse that surrounds them because they internalize the material presented to them. Further, Kaur (2018) discussed that curriculum is the strongest means to convey and convert culture, values and beliefs that exists in the society to the learners and the information of gender portrayed in the curriculum can have huge impact on the personality of a child.

The ways in which students respond to texts that they are exposed to are important determiners for gender equality. Wang et.al (2010) stated that it is important to incorporate issues of gender and diversity when planning a curriculum because classrooms need to change the negative effects of power and imbalances in the hierarchical class structure. However, if students are exposed to gender imbalance in the class by glorifying the text that was written centuries ago, students can learn gender discrimination as one of the major factors and start internalizing them. Plucknette (2013) explained that by solely featuring male centered texts, male students begin to accept the stereotypes that literature places upon them. This acceptance can lead to the practice of gender imbalance in and outside the classroom.

Portrayal of gender roles in the play

Though *The Merchant of Venice* leads us to believe patriarchal domination during the 16th century, Shakespeare has given platform to balance the representation of both genders. Shakespeare shows an obsession with male themes and male characters while on the other hand, portrayal of emancipated female characters are just as much strong and outspoken as male characters (Kumar, 2019). Portia, the most powerful female character, exposes her repressed life in which she is controlled by a dead father, and further, she dresses herself as a man to show herself as member of a male profession (Raouf, 2015). This shows Portia to be passive under the prejudice of dead father and her masked character of Balthasar. Though, Portia chooses the name Balthasar to portray herself as a lawyer, Balthasar was her servant which shows that women were also holding powerful posts compared to their male counterparts. In addition, some of the male characters are portrayed as weak in the play. Though Shylock is one of the most outstanding characters, there are two main approaches to see him: a hateful Jewish moneylender and a person whose mind is full of inferiority because of his religion (Can, 2017). Shylock plays an important role but he always feels inferior. Thus, ultimately one of the strongest male characters also remains inferior. Hinley (1980) found Antonio curiously incongruent and unattainable; the romantic hero Bassanio is accused of fortune hunting; and Lorenzo's love for wealth is slandered. Every prominent male character appears to have a serious flaw. Williams (2012) added that Antonio's failure to help himself feminizes his reaction. The men in the play have jobs like merchants and scholars, yet they are incapable of dealing with broader issues.

Shakespeare, according to Williams (2012), plays with gender norms and inequality in such a way that he simultaneously supports early feminist views while also addressing concerns of sexual injustice by providing more fulfilling forms of gender interaction, however, Rahman and Mohammad (2014) observed that Shakespeare's commendable and intriguing drama *The Merchant of Venice* deals with the issue of racial sexism. Since the play has the content of gender inequality for both the genders, it is important to know how the students perceive these contents.

Methodology

Study Area

The study was conducted in Thimphu Dzongkhag, Bhutan. The study site has high schools located in semi-remote as well as urban area. Six participants were from a school in the semi-remote area and the other six from a school in the urban area. It is likely that the students' perception on gender role while studying the play will be influenced by their social status and environment as Inglehart and Norris (2003) found that the attitudes of people towards the

gender role are related to the level of socio-economic development. This indicates the importance of studying the viewpoints of participants belonging to different environments.

The study sought to find the effects of the portrayal of gender in the drama of grades 11 and 12 which is included in the English curriculum. The participants for the study were twelve students and four teachers of two high schools in Thimphu Dzongkhag. The study included equal gender representation of teachers as well as student participants as there can be different perceptions from different genders.

Data collection tool

Interview

Interview guiding questions were used to interview the teacher and student participants for the study. This helped obtain explicit information about personal feelings, perceptions, and opinions. The semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for further analysis.

Result and Discussion

Following the thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006), four themes were generated. They were: 1. Portrayal of gender roles in the play, 2. Appreciation and criticism towards the play, 3. Impacts on the students, and 4. Teaching experience and methods to encourage gender equality.

Portrayal of Gender in the Play

Strength of women portrayed in the play

The female characters are strong and self-assured. The findings pointed out that instead of 'hero', there is the presence of 'shero' implying the strength of women being strong enough to break gender stereotypes. 'Shero' is an informal word in English which is used for describing a lady respected or idealized for her bravery, notable accomplishments, or virtuous traits. The findings further suggested that women characters are more masculine than the men characters. Kumar (2019) supported that Shakespeare is obsessed with male themes and characters, yet emancipated female figures are just as bold and opinionated as their male counterparts. Similarly, Wanzie (2005) stated that Portia is presented as a strong and resourceful lady who is capable of putting others' needs ahead of her own. The findings also suggested that Jessica is strong enough to go against society and choose her own fate. Since the female characters perform great jobs of solving the problems created by the male characters, this could be the reason for the readers to see the strength of the female characters.

Weakness of women portrayed in the play

The findings pointed out that female characters are portrayed as the weaker sex compared to the male characters. The text itself is highly revealing as there are only three female characters out of a total of nine major roles. The female characters are dominated and controlled by the male characters. Similarly, Traub (2001) supports that Portia is constrained by her father's will and she is a victim of submitting to what is expected of women: obedience, virginity, silence, and piety. Further, Nahvi (2014) believed that Portia's father's control over her even after his death is a testament of men's power over women where women are considered as property rather than humans. The reason for the readers to disregard the strength of the women and

focus on the weakness could be the content of transvestite in the play which shows that, even when the female characters are strong, they cannot show their strength as a woman but have to be masked as men.

Strength of men portrayed in the play

Besides the greater number of male characters in the play, the findings revealed that the plot of *The Merchant of Venice* is male-dominated with men portrayed as brave, powerful, and dominant. Furthermore, it also showed that, in contrast to females, males have more rights and freedom of choice. Maxwell (2015) supported that the women in the play have a lower status in this male-dominated society and are expected to answer to their fathers. The play depicts a society which is ruled by men who have a complete control over his family and the women were considered his property. This could be because of the Elizabethan society where men were regarded with higher esteem than women in many parts of the world.

Weakness of men portrayed in the play

Although the setting of the play is male-dominant, the findings suggested various weaknesses of the male characters. The participants revealed about the male characters being portrayed as superficially strong as none of them displayed courage and intelligence to solve bigger issues as the female characters did. The male characters are boastful and egoistic humans incapable of cleaning the messes that they have created. Likewise, Hinley (1980) found Antonio strangely incongruent and unachievable; the romantic hero Bassanio is alleged of being a fortune hunter, and Lorenzo is slandered for his love for wealth. Further, Williams (2012) added that Antonio's failure to help himself feminizes his reaction. Although, the men in the play hold jobs such as merchants and scholars, they do not possess the ability to deal with larger problems. The reason for such portrayal can possibly be because Shakespeare depicted the society then, and also put forward feminism in his own subtle way because the display of weakness of men can divert the attention of the viewers to the strength of women. Shakespeare has freed the role of women in society, helping to shape the anti-stereotypical environment we live in today for both men and women.

Appreciation and criticism towards the play

General appreciation and criticism towards the play

The findings revealed that the participants appreciate the play because it has an abundance of moral lessons on the themes such as the value of friendship, selflessness, wealth, racism, and the role of women. The teacher participants focussed on the positive values which lead to students' appreciation of the play. Can (2017) stated that the themes of power, struggle, love, and deception are prominent in the play. In all the themes discussed, the female characters have a major role to play. Therefore, it can be said that, alongside the study of themes, the students appreciate the role the women characters take in expressing the themes of the play.

However, the findings also provided information on the play's negativity, particularly in regard to how gender is portrayed. The participants believed that the female characters are portrayed in a lower status compared to the male characters. The findings further suggested the presence of sexism and patriarchy in the play. Howard (1988) supported the existence of patriarchy in the play and stated that within the household, the good woman is isolated, silent, chaste, and immured. Rahman and Mohammad (2014) further stated "*The Merchant of Venice* is Shakespeare's laudable and tantalizing play which deals with the theme of racial sexism" (p. 221). The criticism towards the play seems plausible because, through the degree of

influence Portia's late father has over her, Shakespeare highlights the male supremacy in Venetian culture.

Appreciation and criticism towards the disguise

The study found both positive and negative effects of the content of transvestitism in the play. The majority of the participants chose to look at the positive side of disguise looking at the advantages it provided. The findings showed that the act of disguising not only provides the female characters with confidence but also adds value to their speech and presence. Similarly, Chung (2013) supported that women are restricted to their boudoirs in patriarchal societies, and it is uncommon for them to move beyond their private world to the public arena. Women cannot accomplish their desire of exploring the world known to and belonging to men without transvestitism. In the play, Portia and Nerissa's purpose is fulfilled only when they disguise themselves as males in order to exercise authority through the law. However, there are two ways of looking at it. The purpose is fulfilled because of the disguise, however, do the characters need to be in disguise in order to show their strength? Through this question, we can see that the play has the content of gender stereotypes.

The findings also provided insights into the negative side of transvestitism implying that it was an unnecessary act. The findings pointed to the flaw of the society and upbringing in the Elizabethan era which influenced the writer to reflect the content of transvestitism in the play. Likewise, Chung (2013) indicated that the female characters in Renaissance did not have high social status because they exercised power in disguise through transvestitism. Therefore, it is seen that the disguise of the female characters has few advantages but widens the gap of gender equality pointing out that the only weakness in the female character is their gender and nothing else.

Appreciated values and characters in the play

Apart from the comments on transvestitism, the findings revealed that the participants esteem and admire certain values and characteristics. Antonio, the major character is appreciated for his friendship, kindness and sacrifice, and helpfulness. Portia, another major character, is appreciated for her kindness and confidence. The findings suggested that there is a greater number of participants appreciating the male characters compared to the female characters. Similarly, the values portrayed by the male characters attract the attention of the readers compared to the values portrayed by the female characters. However, literature shows Antonio's inability to help himself (Willimas, 2012) and that he is a 'desperate' and 'anxious' person though he is a 'man of honor' (Can, 2017). Further, Schimek (2002) called him a 'non-noble, titular' character. On the other hand, there are literature appreciating Portia compared to Antonio. Can (2017) stated, "The audience or the reader knows that she is a powerful character as an individual, but not as a woman" (p. 41) and Kumar (2019) believed her to be "better than a clever trickster" (p. 2326). Atmanagara and Yeni (2007) elaborated that Portia is a strong woman who possesses the quality of masculinity and has immense wisdom and intelligence. The difference between the findings and the literature suggests that in the Bhutanese classrooms, the teachers possibly chose to focus more on the positivity of Antonio than Portia, which influenced the students to see more good in Antonio compared to Portia.

Impacts of Portrayal of Gender Roles in the Play

The findings indicated that the play has both positive and negative impacts on the students. Choosing to focus on the positive influences, the students learn extensively about the moral

values reflected in the play which include friendship, love, mercy, and the role of women in society. The findings further suggested that some students take the play as awareness on the strength of women and the consequences of gender inequality. For instance, Lewis (1983) stated that Antonio is portrayed as an alienated man from his own world and his characterization teaches the learners about the “epistemological problem of choice in an ambiguous world” (p.27) and the consequences of our own choice. On the other hand, if Antonio was portrayed as a stronger man, the play would not have been able to focus on the theme of the strength of women.

The findings also pointed out the negative impacts of the portrayal of gender on the students. The teacher participants found fewer number of girls participating in the class. Additionally, the female participants commented on their discontentment on how the female characters are portrayed in the play. A few female participants said that it is disheartening to see the way female characters are treated like objects. Moreover, when the male students were given the role of women, they were reluctant to take the role as they found it uncomfortable because the women were portrayed as inferior characters. Nonetheless, Napombejra (2020), while directing and producing the play *The Merchant of Venice* in Thai, found that though some participants maintained their ideas on gender roles, many were willing to reevaluate their perspectives on how they evaluate things, particularly when it came to the injustice against marginalized groups. It informs that the play helped the audience to review their thoughts. The limited research done on the impact of portrayal of gender roles in the play on the readers makes it difficult to comment on the literature related to the impacts of the play on the students.

Students’ expectations on how the play should be taught

According to the findings, students expect their teachers to teach the play by emphasizing women's strengths rather than their flaws. The student participants stated that when the teacher concentrates on the positive aspects of the play, it encourages them to see the play in a positive light. Moreover, according to the literature, teachers and curricula have a significant impact on how pupils perceive things. Kiarie (2016) found that teachers’ perceptions have a significant impact on students’ learning, retention, and application of knowledge and attitudes, as well as on modifying their perceptions. Wissman (2010) also accepted that students tend to internalize the contents presented to them. Therefore, it is suggested that the curriculum and the teachers need to help the students and groom them into being better citizens.

Teaching Experience and Methods to Encourage Gender Equality

The findings revealed that most teachers taught the play for not more than five years owing to the play being introduced in the Bhutanese school curriculum only in 2017. In the process of teaching the play, the teachers use methods such as the blended method (the combination of lecture and activities) and activity such as role-play is also preferred. However, the majority of the teachers use the traditional lecture method for teaching the play. This questions whether the teaching method can encourage gender equality among the students. The reasons provided by the teachers for using the traditional lecture method were the inaccessible language and exam-based assessment. It is likely that the purpose of teaching a play to encourage gender equality is defeated with the majority of the teachers teaching the play in a traditional lecture method.

However, the findings also noted that teachers involved pupils in numerous assignments and discussions in order to encourage their perceptions of gender equality. The common finding was that the teachers divide students into heterogeneous groups in any activity they provide to the students. The teachers also make the students switch gender roles while doing role play. Further, they initiate discussion among the students on topics such as the difference between the status of women then and now, the importance of gender equality, and the working partnership of men and women. Additionally, they focus on the strength of female characters in the play while teaching the play. According to Sutton (2016), educators must employ creative teaching and evaluation methods to engage students, such as relating Shakespeare's characters and themes to students' life experiences and current knowledge, group learning, and dramatic tactics. Relating to real life, experiences can be one of the best methods to encourage gender equality because students can understand how gender equality evolved with time. It can also help the students realise the problems if there is gender disparity. This way the play can act as an awareness for the students.

Conclusion

The study found that the participants have appreciation as well as reservation towards the content of the play. It was revealed that there are various themes in the play which help the students to learn about moral values such as friendship, love, and importance of women. Moreover, the play serves as an awareness for contemporary students about the status of women in the 16th century. Additionally, the participants had high regard for the disguise as it added value and gave strength to the female characters. It also acted as a mirror to reflect the inner strength of the female characters. Participants stated that they appreciate the friendship, kindness, and sacrifice made by Antonio and the kindness and courage of Portia. More participants were inclined towards the male characters and the values exhibited by them. However, the study found that the play is sensitive in regard to gender as it has contents about sexism, gender stereotypes, and gender discrimination. The disguise further questions the flaw in the society and the upbringing because in order to show their strength, the female could not do anything as females; they had to get into men's clothing.

The presence of gender stereotypes was also a major issue raised by the participants. Women in the play are portrayed as strong, smart, courageous and loyal to their husbands and fathers. The female characters are more capable compared to the male characters. However, the study also revealed that these strong female characters are portrayed as a weaker gender compared to the male characters because they are seen to be dominated by the patriarchal system and gender stereotypes. They were found to have less power compared to the male characters.

The study also revealed the characteristics of the male characters. Male characters exceed the female characters and they are portrayed as brave, powerful and dominant. Unlike the females, they have the freedom of choice. However, these male characters were disregarded by the participants for their inability to solve problems and for the lower level of intelligence compared to the female characters.

The differences in portrayal of male and female characters has impacts on students' perceptions on gender roles. The play helped the students to learn values and moral lessons such as the importance of role of women in the society. Nonetheless, the female students found the content of the play unfair and disheartening. This gave rise to fewer female students

participating in the class while the play is being taught. In the role play, male students felt uncomfortable to take up the roles of female characters. Therefore, the student participants said that they expect the teachers to focus on the positive side of play so that they can concentrate on the same which in turn can result in having more positive impacts than negative.

Although the teachers prefer to teach the play in a traditional lecture method, there are some activities and classroom discussions which the teachers facilitate to enhance the perception of gender equality. Apart from making the students switch gender roles in role play, the teachers always encourage both genders to equally participate in all the activities. Further, the teachers focus on the capabilities of women and discuss the difference between the status of women in the 16th century and now.

Recommendations

The play *The Merchant of Venice* has controversial content on gender roles. There are students who are both impacted positively and negatively by the play. Therefore, it is recommended to the teachers to focus on the positive aspects of the play while teaching in order to help the students take the play positively.

In teaching the play, teachers can employ various activities for the students. It is important for the teachers to facilitate the activities which help the students to enhance their perception on gender roles. Activities such as switching the gender roles in role play and always dividing the students into heterogeneous groups are vital. Moreover, if the teachers employ more activities instead of teaching the play using the traditional lecture method, this will encourage equal participation from both the male and female students.

In addition, future researchers are recommended to use more tools, such as observation and document analysis. Documents are practical resources, and observation can provide authentic information for the researcher to analyze.

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