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Gender Representation in *Aschenputtel* and Its Implications for Children's Literature

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze gender representation in the Grimm fairy tale Aschenputtel and to explore its implications for children's literature. The research employs a qualitative descriptive method using a feminist literary criticism approach to examine how gender roles and power relations are constructed within the narrative. The data consist of words, phrases, and narrative elements from the text of Aschenputtel, which are analyzed through close reading and thematic analysis focusing on issues such as passivity, dominance, and gender stereotypes.

The findings reveal that the story consistently portrays the female protagonist as passive, obedient, and dependent on external forces, while the male character is depicted as active, authoritative, and decisive. These representations reflect traditional patriarchal values and reinforce conventional gender roles. Furthermore, the study shows that such representations may influence children's understanding of gender, particularly through the internalization of stereotypes related to femininity and masculinity. However, the study also highlights that Aschenputtel can serve as a valuable pedagogical tool when approached critically, enabling educators to promote gender awareness and critical thinking through literary learning.

Keywords: Gender Representation, Feminist Literary Criticism, Aschenputtel, Children's Literature

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1. INTRODUCTION

Literature learning plays an important role in both school and higher education contexts, as it not only develops language competence but also fosters critical thinking, empathy, and cultural awareness. Literary texts enable learners to explore human experiences, values, and social realities, making them an essential component in education. In the context of foreign language learning, particularly German, literature provides authentic linguistic input while introducing learners to the cultural and ideological aspects of the target language. Among the various genres of German literature, fairy tales (*Märchen*), especially those collected by the Brothers Grimm, are widely recognized for their pedagogical value due to their simple language, clear narrative structure, and accessibility for learners at different educational levels.

One of the most well-known Grimm fairy tales is *Aschenputtel*, which not only conveys moral values such as kindness and patience but also reflects implicit messages about gender roles and social expectations. From a feminist perspective, the story presents the female protagonist as passive and dependent, while the male character is portrayed as dominant and authoritative. Such representations may influence children's understanding of gender roles, particularly when these narratives are consumed without critical reflection. Therefore, examining gender representation in *Aschenputtel* is important, especially in relation to its impact on children's literature and education, as well as its role in shaping more critical and gender-sensitive perspectives among learners.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature learning plays a crucial role in both school and higher education contexts, as it not only develops language competence but also fosters critical thinking, empathy, and cultural awareness (Nussbaum, 2016; Kramsch, 2018). For elementary students as well as university learners, literary texts function as a medium to explore human experiences, values, and social realities (Lazar, 2017). In the context of foreign language education, particularly German language learning, literature becomes even more significant because it provides authentic linguistic input while simultaneously introducing learners to the cultural and ideological dimensions of the target language (Kramsch, 2018; Paran, 2020).

German literature, encompassing both classical and modern works, offers rich material for analysis and reflection. Among its various genres, fairy tales (*Märchen*) occupy a central position, especially those collected by the Brothers Grimm. Fairy tales are widely recognized as an important form of children's literature that is both engaging and pedagogically valuable (Zipes, 2017; Haase, 2018). Their relatively simple language, clear narrative structure, and repetitive patterns make them more accessible than other literary forms such as novels or poetry (Short, 2018). These characteristics make fairy tales particularly suitable for learners across different educational levels and contribute to children's cognitive and linguistic development (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2019).

One of the most well-known Grimm fairy tales is *Aschenputtel*. This story has been widely disseminated and adapted across cultures, making it a significant object of study in both literary research and children's education (Joosen, 2018). Although *Aschenputtel* is often appreciated for its moral values—such as kindness, patience, and justice—it also conveys implicit messages about gender roles and social expectations. These messages are embedded in the characterization, plot development, and narrative structure, and may influence children's understanding of gender and social norms (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2017; Sunderland, 2020).

From a feminist perspective, literary texts can be examined to uncover how gender is constructed and represented. Feminist literary criticism seeks to analyze how literature reflects, reinforces, or challenges patriarchal norms and gender inequalities. In *Aschenputtel*, the female protagonist is typically portrayed as passive, obedient, and dependent on external forces for transformation. In contrast, the male character (the prince) is depicted as active, powerful, and decisive. Such representations may contribute to the internalization of stereotypical gender roles among young readers. The relevance of this study is closely related to the growing emphasis on gender-sensitive education. Children's literature plays a significant role in shaping children's perceptions of themselves and others. When gender stereotypes are presented without critical reflection, they may influence children's beliefs about appropriate roles and behaviors for males and females. Therefore, it is important to critically examine widely used literary texts such as *Aschenputtel* in order to understand their potential impact on children.

Feminist literary criticism focuses on how literature reflects, reinforces, or challenges gender inequalities. Beauvoir (1949) argues that women are often constructed as the "Other" in patriarchal societies, a concept frequently reflected in literary texts. Butler (1990) further suggests that gender is not a fixed identity but a social construct that is performed through repeated actions and representations.

In the context of fairy tales, Zipes (1983) emphasizes that traditional narratives often reproduce dominant cultural ideologies, including gender norms and power relations. Tatar (1992) also highlights that Grimm's fairy tales convey moral and social messages that shape readers' understanding of acceptable behavior. Previous studies on *Cinderella* and *Aschenputtel* generally indicate that the female protagonist is portrayed as submissive and dependent on external forces, while the prince represents authority and decision-making power. Although some modern adaptations attempt to challenge these stereotypes by presenting more independent female characters, many traditional versions continue to reinforce conventional gender roles.

Although numerous studies have examined *Cinderella* and *Aschenputtel* from a feminist perspective, most of them focus primarily on textual analysis without sufficiently addressing their implications for children's literature and education. There is still limited research that explicitly connects gender representation in German fairy tales with their pedagogical impact on young learners.

This study addresses this gap by integrating feminist literary analysis with an educational perspective. The novelty of this research lies in its effort to link textual representation with its implications for children's understanding of gender roles, thereby providing a more comprehensive and contextually relevant analysis (Crisp, 2021; Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2019). Feminist literary criticism focuses on how literature reflects, reinforces, or challenges gender inequalities. Beauvoir (1949) argues that women are often constructed as the "Other" in patriarchal societies, a concept frequently reflected in literary texts. Butler (1990) further explains that gender is not a fixed identity but a social construct performed through repeated actions and representations. These theoretical perspectives remain highly relevant and are supported by recent studies showing that gender representations in children's literature continue to reproduce social hierarchies and normative expectations (Wilkie-Stibbs, 2018; Sunderland, 2020).

In the context of fairy tales, Zipes (1983) emphasizes that traditional narratives often reproduce dominant cultural ideologies, including gender norms and power relations. Tatar (1992) also notes that Grimm's fairy tales convey moral and social messages that shape readers' understanding of acceptable behavior. Recent research further confirms that fairy tales function as

cultural instruments that transmit gendered values across generations (Bacchilega, 2017; Joosen, 2018).

Previous studies on *Aschenputtel* indicate that the female protagonist is typically portrayed as submissive and reliant on external forces for transformation, while the prince represents authority and decision-making power (Haase, 2018; Zipes, 2017). Although some modern adaptations attempt to challenge these stereotypes by presenting more independent female characters, many traditional versions continue to reinforce conventional gender roles (Joosen, 2018; Bacchilega, 2017).

This study aims to analyze gender representation in *Aschenputtel* and to explore its implications for children's literature. The selection of this topic is based on the assumption that fairy tales, despite their apparent simplicity, contain complex ideological messages that require critical attention, particularly within educational contexts.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method with a feminist literary criticism approach. Qualitative research is appropriate for this study because it focuses on interpreting meanings, symbols, and representations within a literary text (Creswell, 2018). The feminist approach is used to examine how gender roles and power relations are constructed and represented in the fairy tale *Aschenputtel*.

This method allows the researcher to explore the text in depth, particularly in identifying patterns of gender representation, such as passivity, dominance, and dependency. The primary data of this study consist of words, phrases, sentences, and narrative elements in the fairy tale *Aschenputtel* by the Brothers Grimm that indicate gender representation. The data source is the original text of *Aschenputtel* from the Grimm Brothers' collection (*Kinder- und Hausmärchen*). Supporting data are obtained from relevant books and journal articles related to feminist literary criticism, gender representation, and children's literature.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Representation of Female Passivity in *Aschenputtel*

The analysis shows that *Aschenputtel* is consistently portrayed as passive and obedient. This is evident in the scene where she is forced to perform domestic labor:

“Sie musste von morgens bis abends schwere Arbeit tun... und in der Asche schlafen.”

This excerpt illustrates how *Aschenputtel* is confined to domestic duties and deprived of basic comfort. Despite this harsh treatment, she does not resist or challenge her stepmother's authority. Instead, she endures the situation silently.

Another example can be seen when she is given an impossible task:

“Wenn du die Linsen aus der Asche gelesen hast, darfst du mitgehen.”

Rather than refusing the unfair demand, Aschenputtel complies and seeks help from external forces (the birds). This reinforces her lack of agency and supports the idea that female characters are expected to be patient and obedient.

From a feminist perspective, these examples reflect Beauvoir's (1949) notion of women as passive subjects within patriarchal structures.

B. Construction of Male Dominance and Authority

The prince is portrayed as the central decision-maker in the narrative. His authority is evident in the following excerpt:

“Der Königssohn ließ verkünden, er wolle diejenige zur Frau nehmen, der der Schuh passe.”

This statement demonstrates that the prince determines the outcome of the story. Women are positioned as objects to be selected based on their physical compatibility with the shoe.

Furthermore, the process of trying on the shoe reinforces male control:

“Er ließ allen Mädchen im Lande den Schuh anprobieren.”

Here, the prince actively controls the selection process, while female characters remain passive participants. This supports Butler's (1990) idea that gender roles are constructed through repeated actions—men act, women are acted upon.

C. Gender Stereotypes and Symbolic Meaning of Beauty

The importance of physical appearance is strongly emphasized in the narrative. When Aschenputtel appears at the festival:

“Sie sah so schön aus, dass der Königssohn sie nicht mehr aus den Augen ließ.”

This shows that her beauty becomes the primary reason for the prince's attention. Her worth is not based on her abilities or actions but on her physical attractiveness.

In contrast, the stepsisters attempt to force themselves into the ideal of beauty:

“Da schnitt die eine sich die Zehe ab... die andere die Ferse.”

This extreme act highlights the pressure on women to conform to beauty standards. It also symbolizes how female identity is shaped by external expectations.

These findings align with Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2017), who argue that fairy tales often reinforce the association between femininity and beauty.

D. Power Relations and Social Hierarchy

The hierarchical structure in *Aschenputtel* is clearly reflected in the relationship between characters. The stepmother holds authority in the domestic sphere:

“Die Stiefmutter behandelte sie schlecht und gab ihr schwere Arbeiten.”

However, her authority is eventually overturned by the prince’s power, which represents legitimate social authority.

The ending reinforces this hierarchy:

“Der Königssohn erkannte sie als seine Braut.”

Aschenputtel’s rise in status is not achieved through her own effort but through recognition by a male authority figure. This reflects Zipes’ (1983) argument that fairy tales reproduce dominant social and gender hierarchies.

E. Implications for Children’s Literature and Education

The findings of this study indicate that *Aschenputtel* contains strong and consistent gender representations that may influence how children perceive gender roles in their daily lives. The repeated portrayal of female passivity and male dominance is not merely a narrative pattern but also a form of social messaging that can shape children’s understanding of what it means to be a girl or a boy.

In the story, *Aschenputtel* is rewarded for being patient, obedient, and physically attractive, while the prince is portrayed as active, powerful, and decisive. When children are repeatedly exposed to such representations, they may internalize the idea that girls should be passive, compliant, and focused on appearance, whereas boys should take control, make decisions, and hold authority. In contemporary contexts, this can subtly influence children’s behavior, aspirations, and self-perception.

For example, in real-life situations, girls may become more likely to remain silent in unfair situations, prioritize being “nice” and obedient over expressing opinions and associate self-worth with physical appearance. Meanwhile, boys may feel encouraged to dominate conversations or decision-making processes, view leadership as inherently masculine and undervalue emotional expression. These patterns are particularly relevant in school environments. In classroom settings, gendered expectations can influence participation, confidence, and interaction. Girls who internalize passive roles may hesitate to speak up, ask questions, or take leadership roles in group activities. Boys, on the other hand, may feel pressured to appear dominant or assertive, even when collaboration and empathy are needed.

Moreover, in today’s digital era, children are exposed to a wide range of media, including films, animations, and social media content that often reproduce similar gender stereotypes. Traditional fairy tales like *Aschenputtel*, when consumed alongside modern media, may reinforce rather than challenge these representations. As a result, children may develop a narrow understanding of gender roles that does not reflect the diversity and equality promoted in contemporary society.

However, the implications of this study are not solely negative. Instead, they highlight the importance of critical engagement with literary texts. *Aschenputtel* can be used as an effective

educational tool when approached through a critical and reflective lens. Teachers and educators can guide students to question and reinterpret the story by asking reflective questions such as why does *Aschenputtel* remain silent despite being treated unfairly?, is it necessary for a female character to be passive in order to be rewarded?, what would happen if *Aschenputtel* made her own decisions?, are there alternative endings that promote equality and agency?

Through such discussions, students can develop critical thinking skills and become more aware of gender biases in texts. This approach aligns with the concept of critical literacy, where learners are encouraged not only to understand texts but also to question the ideologies embedded within them. In addition, educators can compare *Aschenputtel* with modern adaptations or alternative stories that present more empowered female characters. This comparison can help students recognize that gender roles are not fixed but socially constructed and subject to change, as suggested by Butler (1990).

5. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the representation of gender in the Grimm fairy tale *Aschenputtel* through a feminist literary perspective and explored its implications for children's literature. The findings reveal that the narrative consistently portrays the female protagonist as passive, obedient, and dependent on external forces, while the male character is depicted as active, authoritative, and decisive. These representations reflect traditional patriarchal values and reinforce conventional gender roles. Furthermore, the study shows that such representations are not merely literary elements but carry ideological meanings that may influence children's understanding of gender. Through repeated exposure to narratives like *Aschenputtel*, children may internalize stereotypes that associate femininity with passivity and masculinity with power and control. In contemporary contexts, this can affect children's behavior, self-perception, and social interaction, particularly in educational settings.

However, this study also highlights that *Aschenputtel* should not be viewed solely as a problematic text. Instead, it can serve as a valuable pedagogical resource when approached critically. By applying a critical literacy perspective, educators can guide students to question, reinterpret, and reflect on the gender representations within the story. This approach enables children to develop a more balanced and inclusive understanding of gender roles.

In conclusion, while *Aschenputtel* reflects traditional gender ideologies, its use in education can be transformed into an opportunity to promote gender awareness, critical thinking, and equality. Therefore, the integration of feminist analysis in literature learning is essential to ensure that literary texts contribute positively to children's cognitive and social development.

Author contribution statement

Author 1: Conceptualization, methodology, data collection, data analysis, writing original draft.

Author 2: Supervision, writing review, validation, and final approval of the manuscript.

All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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