Discussion on Myths of Female Heroes in Respect of Gender Socialisation: an Alternative Activity for EFL College Students in Doing a Literary Analysis

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Abstract

Myths, tales and other related stories for children have significant role in all cultures since they can render the multiplicity of experiences; explain the behaviour of the physical universe; and describe human nature and society. These stories are 'the most potent means by which perceptions, values and attitudes are transmitted from one generation to the next' (Hourigan 1997, p.1). One genre of such stories is hero story. The hero story is very popular in children's literature and young adult literature since they are considered to be 'unequivocally good for children morally and mentally' (Hourigan 1997, p.3). To see how the heroic archetype has changed over time, we can explore and compare the journey of traditional female heroes with a contemporary female superhero. This research paper shows how to do an alternative activity for EFL (English as Foreign Language) college students in doing literary analysis by discussing the journey of three female heroes from ancient Greek myths and a recently young adult (YA) text. The heroines of the ancient myths are Psyche in Apuleius's *Cupid and Psyche* (1855); and Artemis in Callimachus's *Artemis* (1988). The heroine of the YA literature is Katniss in Collin's *The Hunger Games* (2008), a contemporary young adult's dystopian literature. By patterning the quests of the heroes in question onto Campbell's monomyth, the author tries to demonstrate that these female heroes (Psyche, Artemis and Katniss) qualify as male heroes. Then, the author compares and contrasts the female heroes in respect of contemporary gender theory and the socialisation of girls.

Keywords: myths, female heroes, gender socialisation

Introduction

In nearly all societies, boys and girls, have different statuses and play different roles. Boys and girls behave differently, dress differently, have different attitudes and interests, and have different leisure activities. Contrary to traditionally held beliefs that these differences between male and female behaviour are biologically or genetically determined, recent research has revealed that they are, to a large extent, socially constructed, or based on the concept of gender (Guez and Allen 2000, p.1).

Humans are born into a 'web of stories pertaining to our gender' which is formed by 'a collective discourse comprising prohibitions, commands, roles and value judgements' (Van Boheemen 1987, p.14). Gender is 'the changeable roles, behaviours, activities, and personality traits that a society views' as ideal standard for men and women (Miller 2012, p.150). Culturally gender defines rights and responsibilities and what is 'appropriate' behaviour for women and men; like culture, gender is fluid and enduring (Reeves & Baden 2000, p.4). In relation with this, Connell stressed that masculinity and femininity are situational, relational concepts that change over time in response to political, economic and social influences (Connell 1995, pp. 68-71). Thus, gender identities and associated expectations of roles and responsibilities are therefore changeable between and within cultures. We can analyse how the construction of gender is socialized through literature particularly hero stories. Through this research paper, the writer will show an example of the literary analysis which can inspire university students at EFL

classroom. Therefore, the discussion in this paper will focus on the literary analysis instead of the teaching model of literature.

Gender Socialization of Girls through the Journey of Female Heroes

I argue that the female heroes is equals to the tasks and tests of the archetypical male heros. The criteria for "heroism" I will draw on come from Joseph Campbell's 1973 critical text *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. In that book, Campbell defines the quest of the hero by analysing heroic myths and legends from around the world. He identifies an archetypical 'monomyth' as a universal heroic pattern to which all hero stories can be loosely linked.

Campbell's monomyth sees the male heroes leaving their ordinary world, having been called to adventure and the male heroes often refuses the call. In contrast, the female heroes directly take the call. The female heroes exist both in traditional narratives and contemporer stories.

To illustrate, Psyche in Apuleius's *Cupid and Psyche* (1855) is motivated to set out on her journey out of grief and personal longing to find her beloved husband. The goodness Artemis in Callimachus's *Artemis* (1988) is motivated to be a brave and skilful girl in ruling forest and by her own strong willingness. Katniss in Collin's *The Hunger Games* (2008) is motivated to set out on her adventure voluntarily to replace his sister who would be a tribute in a dangerous and deadly game controlled by Capitol. Therefore, none of these heroines refuses the adventures calls as many male heroes have done in myths. Rather, they take the chance initiated directly themselves.

Furthermore, Campbell's monomyth points out that all male heroes takes a daring journey, encountering many tests and trials on their ways, but they also gain assistance and support from helpers in one guise or another from the early journey. Unlike most male heroes who gain assistance and support from helpers since their early adventure, the female heroes tend to be more independent. For example, in Callimachus's *Artemis*, as a goodess, Artemis does not gain assistance from any mentor and does not meet any helper on her journey in the forest. Once her father makes her wish becomes true, and of course this can not be categorized as assistance from mentor.

Similarly to Artemis who is potrayed in a strong independent image, Psyche in Apuleius's *Cupid and Psyche* and Katniss Collin's *The Hunger Games* also have independent images particularly in their early journey. However, both Psyche and Katniss get few mentors or helpers in the mist of their adventure. This reveals that the girls have to keep struggling for their lives with or without aid from others; this journey socialises the girls to become independence.

Myths affect on the construction of female identities which are mostly commented by feminist critics. As Bullen and Pope (2012, p.4) states that 'Feminist critics comment on the effects that a culture's narratives have on the construction of individual female identities, especially through the power of public narrative such as myths which have community approval and set the standards by which the community organises itself.' We can see how the gender is constructed through the beauty norms which are attached in myth of Psyche, Artemis and Katniss.

In the myth of *Cupid and Psyche*, Psyche is associated with the most beautiful girl who was wrongly worshipped by humans and thus made her punished by goodness - Venus. In the myth of *Artemis*, a male hunter -Actaeon- is accidently told to watch Artemis's naked beautiful body while bathing. In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss has to be dressed and made up by a man - Chinna to be seen beautifully during the interview on TV. These descriptions reinforce the idea or assumption that the girls should always be beautiful object to be seen. In fact, girls should look like as herself and act as a subject. The portrayal of female as beautiful heroes sends girls a message emphasizing a woman's ideal appearance and the overall importance of appearance to their lives. On the other side, the myths position girls in order not to be trapped in beauty norms since the female beauty norms are products and tools of patriarchy (Brownmiller 1984).

The construction of gender equality is important for boys and girls. Therefore, liberal feminists wanted to open up possibilities for girls and to remove limitations on their lives

(Martin 2005, p.458). The equality of gender can be seen in the part of three female heroes' journey. Firstly, in the myth of *Cupid and Psyche*, a wife is not tested to an easy task which is usually associated in traditional feminine stereotypes, instead doing some difficult and dangerous tasks which are usually associated with men's task.

For instance Psyche's tasks include taking the golden fleece from the mad rams, taking icy water from the streams with dragons, and climbing the mountains to find the way to go to underworld. Secondly, in myth of *Artemis*, a daughter and a son act and are treated equally as what occurs to Zeus and Leto's children in Olympians' Kingdom. Artemis and Apollo get the same gift from Zeus: a bow and arrow for skilful archery. Their father never tells their children that archery is the skill for boy only. Lastly, *The Hunger Games*, girls and boys participate equally in the deadly games. 'There's no alteration of the game' for the tributes of Hunger Games as there is a vision of male and female in sports competition (Miller 2012, p.152).

Biological sex (femaleness or maleness) is imbued with socially constructed meanings (gender). Nelson (2007, p.148) points out that in traditional stereotypes, sexism privileges men over women and masculinity over femininity. The women are often stereotyped as weak, powerless and dependent one. These traditional stereotypes do not occur to Psyche, Artemis and Katniss.

In Apuleius's *Cupid and Psyche*, Psyche is not depicted as a passive and silent woman, rather she actively seeks what she wants: find her lover. Her action can be seen later from difficult and dangerous tasks given by her lover's mother – Venus. The tasks are from sorting and dividing a huge pile of mixed seeds and grains in a very limited time until visiting Proserpine in the underworld. Through Psyche's journey which needs a strong physique and a deep patience, the implied reader is positioned to feel that Psyche gets maturation both physically and mentally after all.

Likewise, Artemis is depicted as a brave and skilful goodness who goes hunting with a bow and arrow. She is associated with her brother, Apollo, the prince of archery, in nearly all his adventures. She does not rule marsh, forest and mountain; but she is a skilful huntress - 'her gleaming arrows smote sea as well as land' (Bulfinch 1894, p.64). Therefore, the portrayal of Artemis positions the girls to pay attention to the socialization of skilful powerful female like Artemis.

Furthermore, the myth of Artemis presents 'a traditional tomboy huntress who stood for chastity' or eternal virgin (Baugh 1999). The word 'virgin' originally meant not that a woman is sexually inexperienced but that she is independent. As Harding (pp. 102-103) mentions that 'in the ancient meaning of the word *virgin* means one-in-herself, belonging to herself alone.' Therefore, the portrayal of Artemis also positions the girls to understand that woman can be like Artemis like Artemis if she wants to do so.

Like Artemis, Katniss is also portrayed as a good hunter in Collin's *The Hunger Games*. Katniss lives in a place called District 12, which is sometimes enclosed by a electrified fence that's supposed to keep out the predators from the woods. Trespassing in the woods is illegal, but that does not stop Katniss. The older sister in her family hunts there for food with her bow, a weapon with which she is nearly an expert. She does not depend on her family; instead her family depends on her since her father passed away.

Like Artemis, Katniss is also portrayed as a strong and independent girl. Katniss is not like other common superhero types which are described by Lawrence (2002, p.43) as the one who has disguised origins, pure motivations, a redemptive task, and extraordinary powers. However, Katniss has saved helpless women such as her younger sister, Rue, and the youngest tribute in Hunger Games, Prim. This makes her is quite similar with the character of American Super Woman who is also told by Emad (2006, p.959) as saver of helpless people. Katniss is an example of modern female hero who performs acts of what Bennett (2010, p.284) calls 'dramatic male physical prowess and risk taking'.

Although Artemis and Katniss are portrayed out of traditional feminine stereotypes, as brave, strong, independent, powerful, characteristics which are usually associated with males, they are also portrayed as caring and nurturing. In the forest, Artemis likes to care and heal

animals. In Panem, Katniss cares for her family's food supply, cares for her sister, and even cares those who supposed to be her competitors in the Hunger Games.

In children's literature, a narrative conveys a socializing content meant to make children behave in the ways that fit them into the society. Children internalize the story and act it out in play or in their mind (Ruterana 2012, p.88). Stereotypic gendered characterization can be harmful in the way that it can limit both boys and girls in the full realization of their potential and expectations (Ruterana 2012, p.89). In relation to this case, the characterization of Psyche, Artemis and Katniss does not limit the female's ability and hopes. Psyche is able to venture out to dangerous and risky places in order to find her husband. Artemis is able to be the most powerful hunters in order to rule the forest and mountain. Katniss is able to survive in deadly games for replacing her sister as tributes controlled by Capitol.

Therefore, the narrative of female heroes' journey positions the girls to pass their hardship, empower themselves and achieve their dreams. Girls listening to this tale are positioned to imbibe the feeling that the girls are not inferior to the boys, but they have equal opportunity and ability for their existence and life. The fact that the girls can do what the boys do can be understood within matriarchal view that gives unlimited operational space for girls.

The act of marriage *space* in myths is heroic undertakings and is of great value both personally and culturally. Psyche is depicted as a girl who marries a god. By contrast, Artemis is well known as the goddess who remains eternally a virgin. Katniss is not married and not eternally a virgin either, but she has two close boy friends who loves her (even though Katniss doesn't decide yet who will be chosen). Therefore, the depiction of female characters socialize a message that the girls have their own choice to get married or not; to have a boyfriend or not. The girl is free to determine their own choice.

The female heroes in myths and other related stories can socialize the gender role for the girls because the stories may offer something worthy for the children's life stages. As stated by Bullen and Pope (2012, p.2) that myth 'plays a role in the socialisation of children, contributing to a process, beginning at infancy, through which children acquire the habits, beliefs, and accumulated knowledge that will equip them to fit into the adult social world.' The other function of myth is also mentioned by Stephens and McCallum (1998, p.62) who state that myths offers the children 'privileged patterns of thinking, believing, and behaving which explain or suggest ways in which the self might relate to the surrounding world.'

The domains of female heroes (Psyche, Artemis, and Katniss) are not only their home, but it is also the environment outside the home, and the world beyond. This means that the domain of the girls and women is no longer only at the domestic space and they venture out to the world outside such as forests or woods. These are the areas which need physical and mental strength to live and survive since the forests and the woods are associated with dangerous places. Their tales depict the sphere of operation for girls and the attendant danger they face. The girls travel for a long distance then they encounter some problems or obstacles to be overcome. However, forest may be no longer function as the domain in which contemporary girls operate.

Psyche leaves her home and goes climbing the high and cocky mountains and goes to underworld alone as tested by Venus to get back Cupid. Artemis leaves Zeus - her father's Kingdom, and rules the mountains without any man's help except her *nymphs*-female companions for a goddess. Katniss leaves her family at the Seam and goes to the Capitol to survive using *space* her archery and climbing skills Hunger Games. In doing their tasks or tests, the female heroes do not only use their feminine attributes but also acts from their masculine sides which create strong femininity for them. After finishing their tasks and attain their goals in their journey, the girls becomes mature in the process of identity formation. Therefore, Psyche, Artemis, and Katniss prove that they can exist, pass and survive on their journey in the wild world.

Conclusion

Literary critics acknowledge that children's literature belongs to the literary and socio-educational systems at the same time as it is read for literary experience, entertainment, as well as education and socialization (Ruterana, 2012, p.87). The journey of female heroes may appeal the implied readers, especially the girls. Some stories with rich descriptions of the lives and personalities of inspiring characters (mythical or real, contemporary or historical) can entertain as well serve as role models for the girls. The implied readers can imitate: (1) Psyche as a beautiful loyal and tough wife; (2) Artemis as a powerful and skilful goddess, (3) Katniss as a young, brave, energetic, intelligent and strong survivor. In other words, the archetype of the female heroes and the particular distinctions of their stories allow female readers a chance to see themselves reflected in the fiction, to see strong and confident young women performing deeds they themselves thought impossible.

The discussion above has shown how three hero tales look at the heroines not in terms of how they are merely affected by certain social institutions and systems. On the other hand, this paper shows how the myths can represent the heroines as active agents for their lives and also for others in their world by demonstrating their strong and high energy to act and trust their willingness and intuition. One agent is like Psyche who presents herself as the archetype of the loving and loyal wife with strong maternal instincts. The other agents are like Artemis and Katniss who present themselves as the archetype of warrior women. Therefore, the journey of female heroes in the narrative of Apuleius's *Cupid and Psyche* (1855), Callimachus's *Artemis* (1988) and Collin's *The Hunger Games* (2008) positions the girls not to be passive, but always actively contested patriarchy in society's culture.

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