

# Sexism in Online Children's Literature: *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck* by Beatrix Potter

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Abstract: This study examines the portrayal of sexism in online children story by Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck*. This story is chosen because it is written by a woman and it has female character but it is not the heroine in the story. It applies Ambivalent Sexism theory by Peter Glick and Susan Fiske in order to find what attitudes of ambivalent sexism portrayed in the story. It also uses additional tools to view sexism retrieved from The Council on Interracial Books for Children. The result of this study shows that sexism still occurs in children's literature through the story lines, lifestyles, relationship between people, the hero, and loaded words, strengthen with the illustration. This study also found ambivalent attitudes in the stories where benevolent sexism is more dominant which identifies positive evaluations fit to protective paternalism. Meanwhile, the strongest hostile sexism portrayed in the story is the domination of male toward female or heterosexual hostility. It also highlights the traditional expectation that men are aggressive and authoritative while women are submissive.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Children's literature is an effective way to transmit values and attitudes toward readers. This literary work is in the form of narrative which makes the readers easier to interpret and to understand the story. children's literature which is considered as picture books provide role models for children in defining and shaping standards for feminine and masculine, behavior, and attitudes toward women.

The problem is that gender stereotypes and sexism have always been an issue in literature for children. Most of the children's literatures portray male as the character who leads the story, while female is passive. Moreover, authors or illustrators often apply labels to characters based on their stereotypes on sex.

Sexism involves the attitude which favors people based on sex. In broader sense, sexism is part of the practice of gender discrimination. A study claims that children's literature is inherently sexist because the majority of heroes are male. As reported in the guardian an analysis of 6,000 best-selling children's books published during the past century concludes that male lead characters vastly outnumber female ones. Overall, 31% of the best-sellers featured a

female lead character, compared to 57% featuring a male.

This study examines *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck* written and illustrated by Beatrix Potter. She is a famous English writer especially in children's literature. She has written and illustrated more than 20 children's books starring Jemima Puddle-Duck, Peter Rabbit, and Benjamin Bunny. *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck* tells about a female duck called Jemima.

This study intends to explore the sexism inside the story of *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck* due to the writer of it is a woman, which is Beatrix Potter. It is interesting to find out how woman writers depict sexism in their story, and how they express their idea of sexism on it.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Children's literature and Sexism

Sexism has been defined as open antipathy toward women Moreover, most of children's literatures are in the form of picture books. The picture books play an important role in role in early sex-role

socialization because they are a vehicle for presentation of societal values to young child. Hence, children's literature has influence in developing children's gender identities.

## 2.2 Ambivalent Sexism

This study applies ambivalent sexism theory by Peter Glick and Susan Fiske. The theory posits that sexism has two sub-categories which are *hostile sexism* (negative evaluations and stereotypes about a sex, for example women are incompetent) and *benevolent sexism* (positive evaluation of sex that may appear, for example women should be protected).

Benevolent sexism idealizes women as pure creatures that ought to be protected, supported, and whose love is necessary to make a man complete, but it implies that women are weak and best suited for conventional gender roles. Hostile sexism is a set of negative beliefs and attitudes toward women including that women are in competition with men. In contrast, Benevolent Sexism is a seemingly positive evaluation of women as more moral and refined than men. Women are characterized as "wonderful but weak" and need to be cared. The stereotype of Benevolent Sexism focuses on the "dotting mother" and "devoted wife". In other words, benevolent sexism reflects the tendency to endorse the traditional feminine ideal or to view women in idealized, overly romantic terms or as delicate creatures that require protection.

Benevolent sexism is sneaky and it can be hard to identify. It has seemingly positive evaluations imply that a) women are weak and need to be protected, (b) women should not deviate from traditional gender role as mothers and caretakers, and (c) women should be idolized by men for their sexual purity and availability. While, hostile sexism is easier to detect and counter. It could be a harmful comment or attitudes toward women.

Hostile and benevolent sexism are prevalent across cultures, and cross cultural differences in ambivalent sexism are predictable and systematic, with both ideologies relating to national measures of gender inequality. Moreover, underlying the differences between cultures are important consistencies in the structure and consequences of sexist beliefs. Both Hostile and Benevolent sexism are presumed to be "legitimizing ideologies" beliefs that help to justify and maintain inequality between groups. According to Barreto and the Ellemers to protest when people give good sexism, they are always not recognized as having a sexist view than

when exploring hostile sexism. This happens because a good source of sexism is not in accordance with the mental prototype of the sexist and thus relatively good. Such a judgment procedure occurs in the same way for men and women, and it is relatively independent of affective reactions. However, when looking at the emotional response experienced by people, women feel more emotional when facing HS than when facing BS, while men experience the same emotional level in both conditions experienced.

In the opinion of Glick and Fiske, two American psychologists hypothesize that hostile and positive sexism is the result of predictable structural relations between men and women that are common to human society: a) Men are given a higher state than women; b) men and women are often rivaled based on social roles and basic characteristics c) male-female relations are always associated with sex, a biological condition that arises and interdependence and sex differences. The three patriarchal factors, gender differentiation, and sexual reproduction together produce mutual disagreements and positive attitudes towards other sexes.

Hostile and reference attitudes refer to the same three content domains: a) paternalism, including both domination as well as protection and affection; b) gender differentiation, which can assume connotation of both competitive as well as complementary gender differentiation; and c) heterosexuality, comprehensive of the genuine desire of intimate closeness, heterosexual intimacy, and of the desire to dominate heterosexual hostility.

## 3 METHODS

The data source of this study is *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* from the collection of tales by Beatrix Potter. To find sexism in the story, this research employs five aspects from ten quick ways to view sexism retrieved from *The Council on Interracial Books for Children* which are story lines, lifestyles, relationship between people, the hero, and loaded words. Besides, for the rest of five aspects, illustrations, the effects on children's self-image, authors' or illustrators' background, authors' and illustrators' perspective, and copyright date are additional information to support the analysis and to strengthen the result of the research.

To find ambivalent sexism, this study applies the theory of Peter Glick and Susan Fiske. The theory posits that sexism has two sub-categories

which are *hostile sexism* (negative evaluations and stereotypes about sex).

## 4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Story Line

In the story line we found that during the escaping, Jemima met the fox which described as an elegant gentleman, but obviously very crafty and fond of duck-eggs. He tricks Jemima into making him a most delicious omelette, but Jemima is naive and as easily tricked. She was deceived by the elegant gentleman who is actually a villain.

*The man opened his eyes above his newspaper and saw curiously at Jemima— "Madam, are you stuck?" he said. He has a very long tail and he occupies the tail, because the stump is rather wet.*

*Jemima thinks she's someone who is very strong and handsome ...*

*Jemima complains about very much chicken.*

*The fox was made sure to hide by saying:*

*"This is my summer residence; you won't find my world – my winter home - very comfortable," said the friendly man.*

The story continues:

*He was so polite, that he seemed almost sorry to let Jemima go home for the night. He promised to take great care of her nest until she came back again next day.*

*He said he loved eggs and ducklings; he should be proud to see a fine nestful in his wood-shed.*

This may make the image of women as easily tricked. Jemima show her stupidity again while she met the collie dog. She immediately believes in the person he has just met. "How a female can be that naive?"

*The collie-dog Kep met her coming out, "What are you doing with those onions? Where do you go every afternoon by yourself, Jemima Puddle-duck?"*

*Jemima was rather in awe of the collie; she told him the whole story.*

Both sections above when Jemima met the fox and when she met the collie dog seems to say that male is smarter than female. Males are good at trick while female are easily tricked.

Some provide clues to the differentiation between male and female characteristics when the dogs are attacked by foxes.

*when there were very frightening voices - barking, babbling, growling and howling, squealing and complaining. He had bite on his ear and both the puppies were limping.*

The moment of barking, baying, growls and howls, groaning comes up with ideas that man is aggressive. Besides, physically, the collie dog and foxhound puppies are strong and brawny. The illustration of them seems tell about "how the man should be". They emphasizes athletic competition and traditional masculinity; male symbol of power and authority.

The end of the story has bittersweet ending. Jemima escapes from the fox with the help of some dogs. These foxhound puppies are hungry and go for food, as well and they end up eating Jemima's eggs before her eyes. She cries all the way back to the farm. The story then cuts into the future where she successfully hatches four ducklings, made slightly sadder by the fact that it is only four, implying that she laid more eggs but failed to hatch them because she was a "bad sitter".

### 4.2 Lifestyles

One crucial element in reproducing traditional gender roles lies in visual representation of gender and sex, with anthropomorphic animals is best expressed though what the characters wear. Unlike the male Fox, Jemima is not fully-dressed. She only wears shawl and poke bonnet. This is the visual standard strengthens the coding of female bodies as inherently sexual. Clothing on different character is aligned with a sexually mature adult female which being fully clothed but not for young bodies.

Women (even when they are anthropomorphic animals) must covered up because their bodies represent sexuality, while animal children are remain naked because children are viewed by adults in our society as non-sexual being.

The naked young bodies in picture books are not without sexual significance [13]. Hence, Jemima is not fully dressed because she is young female that sexually attractive.

*Waw is very amazing, a very interesting picture in which the duckling with its mother.*

One might see this story as a critique of women's reproductive rights because the story tells about Jemima that cannot hatch her own eggs. On the other hand, it also idolized the sexual purity of female. The explanation have discussed in story line's analysis.

### 4.3 Relationship between People

Overall, *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck* shows interaction between animal nature which are the interaction of Jemima between hen, fox, dogs; civilized behaviour when Jemima still try to hatch her own eggs although she is a bad sitter; relationship between individual and the social world.

The story is also involving power, importance, and disguise of males as portrayed in farmer, the fox, collie dogs, and puppies. Meanwhile, women position themselves as if they were lower down the food chain than men, to be identified with prey rather than predator, with the sheep rather than the shepherd. The notion of female as the self and female as the other is both reflected and strengthened by marking the feminine as "different" is also reflected in the story.

### 4.4 The Hero

Authors or illustrators often apply labels to characters based on their stereotypes. Furthermore, tendency to assume that a person or animal is stronger than female and used this coding in portraying the characters of sexism. In the Jemima's story, the hero is the dogs which are collie dog and two foxhound puppies. They helped Jemima to safe the eggs from the fox. However, at the end the collie dog and foxhound puppies also eat Jemima's eggs because of their hunger and desire.

*Unfortunately the puppies rushed in and gobbled up all the eggs before he could stop them.*

*Jemima Puddle-duck was escorted home in tears on account of those eggs.*

The story end with bittersweet ending as explained in story line's analysis. Moreover it shows that males always portrayed as more physically aggressive and competent, while females are portrayed as more dependent and more likely to express sadness.

### 4.5 Loaded Words

"Puddle Duck" is typically bird of fresh, shallow marshes and rivers rather than of large lakes and bays. They are good divers, but usually feed by dabbling or tipping rather than submerging.

The word "puddle duck" has negative connotation toward women. Puddle duck means a female with exceedingly low standards. Primarily in the class of drug addicts; or a girl who less capabilities, they just take selfies and start drama.

This may not fit the context, but it may be a reference for more in-depth analysis.

*She flew beautifully when she had got a good start.*

The word "beautifully" gives images that females are assigned with beauty.

*But—seated upon the stump, she was startled to find an elegantly dressed gentleman reading a newspaper.*

*He had black prick ears and sandy coloured whiskers.*

*The gentleman raised his eyes above his newspaper and looked curiously at Jemima— "Madam, have you lost your way?" said he. He had a long bushy tail which he was sitting upon, as the stump was somewhat damp.*

The lines above show positive portraits of a man by giving good adjectives, such as "elegant". The way the author describes the fox also gives sense that man is suitable in public sphere and proper to be adored. Other lines also show that Jemima was so spellbound with the fox.

*Jemima thought him mighty civil and handsome....*

*Jemima complained of the superfluous hen.*

*"This is my summer residence; you would not find my earth—my winter house—so convenient," said the hospitable gentleman.*

*He had a noble character, that he seemed very sorry by telling Jemima to go home for the night. He promised to tidy up his nest until he returned again the next day.*

*He really likes eggs and ducks; he must be happy to see the nest.*

*... so I don't need to leave my cage until the eggs hatch. They are cold, "said Jemima who knew about it.*

*Jemima Puddle-duck is an uneducated person: not even mentioning sage and onions makes him suspicious.*

From the sections above, there is a big different in describing Jemima and the fox. The fox is described with positive adjectives and in a good way, such as "elegantly dressed gentleman" "polite" "handsome" "a civil" "lovely".

While Jemima is described as a "simpleton" which means an ignorant, foolish, or silly person. There is a horrible judgment of character of Jemima. The narrator even pokes fun at her cluelessness at all. At the end of this story, again, Jemima is called as "she had always been a bad sitter."

*Jemima Puddle-duck said that it was because of her nerves; but she had always been a bad sitter.*

The five aspects above in Jemima's story which are story lines, lifestyles, relationship between people, the hero, and loaded words also show the

existence of sexism. The male characters depicted as have important role, while female characters are only submissive. The fact that sexist treatments still occurs in children's literature also portrayed through the others aspects such as, illustrations, the effects on children's self-image, authors' and illustrators' perspective and background, and copyright date. Those additional information above others five aspects are supporting the result of five aspects above that relates with the text inside the story.

This paper symbolized the fox's intelligence and his connection to the outside world, while Jemima is limited to the domestic sphere.

The parts when the fox is attacked by the collie dog and foxhound puppies also shown the superiority of man

The illustration when the fox guides Jemima to the shack also need to be examined. At the time, the fox become the leader and Jemima just a follower who simply believe him without suspicion when he was a stranger whom she had just met

*He became the road leader to a very old house and there were no shadows between the gloves..*

Here, Potter seems want to say that a male has more potential to be a leader than a female and visually link him to the role of leader. By visually marking femininity more consistently or more prominently than masculinity, numerous works position women and girls as submissive, marginalizing them and perpetuating male privilege.

The fact that this story is about Jemima and she is the main character does not make good impression to her. Jemima is described as a poor duck that wants to hatch her own eggs but is easily tricked by a sly fox.

The number of the characters between females and males also have big different. From the whole story, the illustrations portray more males' character than females. There are 5 males and only 3 females with 2 minor characters. This kind of portrayal may lead to the belief that males have boarder and wider sphere and have more influential than females.

#### 4.6 The Effects on a Child's Self-image

Children may use the gender scripts and ideologies in the children's book when forming an impression of the generalized other. The messages conveyed through representation of males and females in books contribute to children's ideas of what it means to be a boy, girl, man, or woman.

A lead researcher Janice McCabe of Florida State university, called the trend inherently sexist

stated that "books contribute to how children understand what is expected of women and men, and shape the way children will think about their own place in the world," she said. "The persistent pattern of disparity among animal characters may reveal a subtle kind of symbolic annihilation of women disguised through animal imagery."

Children's books are dominated by male central characters, new research has found, with the gender disparity sending children a message that "women and girls occupy a less important role in society than men or boys."

#### 4.7 Ambivalent Sexism

*The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck* portrayed ambivalent sexism which Benevolent Sexism (BS) is more dominant than Hostile Sexism (HS). The strongest hostile sexism that is found in the stories is about domination of male. Women are viewed as not being fully competent adults and legitimizing the need for a superordinate male figure. Just like *Dominative Paternalism*, *Competitive Gender Differentiation* presents a social justification for male power and domination in the social life. This justification leads a stereotype that only men are perceived as having the traits necessary to govern important social institutions. In Jemima's story sexism is obvious in through the illustrations. The fox was illustrated reading newspaper which show the intelligence, while Jemima just a bad sitter not even hatch her own eggs.

Moreover HS has notion that men sexual attraction toward women may be inseparable from a desire to dominate them *Heterosexual Hostility*. These notion portraits in the fox character in *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck*. The fox has desire to prey Jemima and her eggs. With his ingenuity he cheats and tricks Jemima who is described as a duck who is stupid and easily deceived. The power and domination of men also portrayed when the dogs who helped Jemima to protect her eggs from fox ironically eat the eggs.

*Unfortunately the puppies rushed in and gobbled up all the eggs before he could stop them.*

*Jemima Puddle-duck was escorted home in tears on account of those eggs.*

In the other side, there are 8 times tendency of benevolent sexism in the stories through the illustration, story line, lifestyle, and the hero. In case of benevolent sexism, there is *Protective paternalism* which dictates that women should be protected as portrayed when the collie dog and two

fox hand puppies lead as the hero for Jemima, they acted as protectors for Jemima and save the eggs from the crafty fox.

*Complementary gender differentiation* allows women to compensate for their lower social status by ascribing positive traits to women in domains that do not challenge male authority, such as viewing women as being morally superior or having a more sophisticated sense of culture. These categories of benevolent sexism showed in Jemima's story. Although the author seems to limit the sphere of females characters, she gives good image of woman that woman is romantic, care, and full of grace. The story seems to tell that women can be independent without men. In Jemima's story, the complementary gender differentiation was depicted in Jemima struggle in hatching her own eggs whereas she is a bad sitter.

"I wish to hatch my own eggs; I will hatch them all by myself," quacked Jemima Puddle-duck.

The last is *Heterosexual intimacy*, likewise Jemima's story that showed appreciation of women's sexual purity and productivity. Although in many stories the female character only acts as passive and less action, the female characters are still needed, means that male is incomplete without female and female is the complimentary of male.

However, sometimes there is a misperception of the relationship between HS and BS. This misperception also poses implications for women's everyday lives. For example, women are more likely to accept being controlled by male if the restrictions are imposed in a protective paternalistic tone. Moreover, identifying ambivalent sexism could be interpreted differently depending on the target's gender.

Unlike hostile sexism, benevolent sexism is often not seen as problematic due to its subjectively positive content. However, Yeung stated that HS and BS are the carrot and stick that confine women to play traditional gender roles. Indeed, several researches have well-established that HS and BS are complementary forms of sexism.

## 5 CONCLUSION

This study shows that sexism still occurs in Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck* despite its writer which is woman writer. This study reveals that the children's books portray a stereotype which promotes the notion of traditional feminine ideal which leads into some sexist treatments. The study

also shows the existence of ambivalent sexism attitudes in the stories which focus on the attitudes toward women with the domination of benevolent sexism. The strongest hostile sexism portrayed in the story is the dominative of male toward female. The portrayal of males' desires in order to dominate and control females fit of heterosexual hostility. In relation to dominative paternalism and competitive gender differentiation, the story presents a social justification for males' higher position and power. It also highlights the traditional expectation that men are aggressive and authoritative while women are submissive.

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