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Exploring the theory of gender schema in literary works: A critical study

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Abstract

Gender schema theory provides a framework for understanding how individuals internalize and maintain gender roles through cognitive structures called gender schemas. These schemas influence how people perceive themselves and others in relation to their gender and influence behaviour and attitudes. This theoretical perspective offers valuable insights when examining literature, showing how texts reflect, reinforce, and challenge prevailing gender norms and stereotypes. Literature often reflects social gender schemas and presents characters and narratives that conform to or reinforce traditional gender roles. For example, classic novels often portray men as strong and women as caring, reinforcing conventional gender expectations. However, literature also serves as a platform to subvert these norms. Contemporary works question traditional gender roles by representing diverse and non-traditional gender identities, thus challenging rigid gender schemas. Therefore, this article demonstrates the use of this particular theory in several canonical literary works and how major literary figures have adapted and criticized the theory in their works.

Keywords: Cognitive structures, gender norms, Gender schema theory, schemas, stereotypes

Introduction

Gender schema theory, introduced in 1981 by psychologist Sandra Bem, provides a cognitive framework for understanding how individuals learn and internalize gender roles and stereotypes. The theory suggests that people use gender schemas i.e., mental structures that organize and guide their understanding of gender-related information to interpret and respond to their social world. This framework provides insights into the ways in which gender roles are acquired and maintained and how they influence behaviour, self-image, and perceptions of others.

Gender schemas are cognitive structures that include beliefs, attitudes, and expectations associated with gender roles. According to Bem, these schemas develop through socialization processes and influence how individuals perceive themselves and others in relation to gender. These mental frameworks help people categorize and interpret gender-related information, guide their behaviour, and shape their identities.

Gender schemas are not static but are continually reinforced and updated through social experiences. For example, children learn about the behaviours that can be considered “appropriate” for their gender from a variety of sources, including family, media, and peers. These learned behaviours become part of the child's gender schema and influence how they perceive and address gender expectations.

Gender schema theory assumes that gender schemas are formed early in life. From a young age, children are exposed to gender-specific stimuli, such as toys, colors, and activities that contribute to the development of their gender schemas. For example, a child who is repeatedly confronted with the idea that girls play with dolls and boys play with trucks will internalize these roles as part of their gender schema.

Socialization agents such as parents, teachers and the media play an important role in shaping these schemes. Parents often model and reinforce gender-specific behaviours, such as encouraging boys to be assertive and girls to be supportive. Likewise, media representations of gender roles can perpetuate stereotypes by portraying characters and situations in ways consistent with traditional gender norms.

Gender schemas influence behaviour by guiding individuals toward actions consistent with their perceived gender roles. For example, a person with a strong gender schema might feel obligated to participate in activities that are considered appropriate for their gender and avoid those that are considered inappropriate. This can lead to the reinforcement of traditional gender roles and limit people's opportunities to explore interests or careers outside of these roles.

The influence of gender schemas also extends to self-concept. Individuals internalize social expectations and norms regarding gender, which shape their self-perceptions and desires. A person who believes that certain characteristics are inherent to their gender might develop a self-concept appropriate to those beliefs. For example, a girl who has internalized the stereotype that female gender is less competent in mathematics may develop less confidence in her mathematical abilities, which affects her academic decisions and career goals.

Gender schema theory helps explain the persistence of gender stereotypes. Stereotypes are simplified and generalized beliefs about the characteristics and behaviours associated with each gender. These stereotypes are often reinforced by gender schemas, as individuals seek information that confirms their existing beliefs and ignore information that contradicts them. For example, if a gender schema includes the belief that men are naturally better leaders than women, individuals may interpret leadership behaviour in a way that confirms this stereotype. This can result in women continuing to be underrepresented in leadership positions and affect organizational dynamics.

While gender schema theory offers valuable insights into the development and influence of gender roles, it is not without its criticisms and limitations. One criticism is that the theory may oversimplify the complexities of gender identity by focusing primarily on binary gender roles. Gender schema theory traditionally emphasizes the dichotomy between men and women and can overlook the experiences of people who identify as non-binary or queer.

Additionally, some critics maintain that the theory does not fully explain the intersectionality of gender with other social identities such as race, class, and sexuality. These intersections can influence how gender schemas are formed and applied, adding additional layers of complexity that theory may not fully account for.

Understanding gender schemas has practical implications for addressing gender-related issues. In educational institutions, for example, educators can take gender schemas into account when designing curricula and teaching practices. By promoting gender-neutral activities and combating stereotypes, educators can help students develop more flexible and inclusive gender schemas. In the workplace, recognizing and addressing gender patterns can help create a more equitable environment. Organizations can implement policies and practices that address gender bias, such as using blind recruitment processes and promoting diverse role models.

Gender schema theory also has implications for media representation. Media producers can help challenge and reshape gender schemas by presenting diverse and non-stereotypical gender representations. By portraying characters in roles and behaviours that challenge traditional norms, media can contribute to the development of more inclusive and equitable gender schemas. Gender schema theory provides a valuable perspective for understanding

how gender roles and stereotypes are learned, maintained, and influenced through cognitive processes. By recognizing the role of gender schemas in shaping behaviour, self-concept, and perceptions, we can better understand the persistence of gender norms and work to create more inclusive and equitable environments. Although the theory has its limitations, it is an important framework for the study of gender and psychology due to its contribution to our understanding of gender socialization and its impact on various areas of society.

Many literary works reflect and reinforce traditional gender norms, reflect social expectations, and reinforce gender schemas prevalent at the time they were written. In classical literature, characters are often portrayed in ways catering to conventional gender roles. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, male characters such as Mr. Darcy embody characteristics associated with traditional masculinity: strength, authority, and rationality. In contrast, female characters like Elizabeth Bennet initially challenge these roles by demonstrating independence, critical thinking, and by refusing to marry for convenience. Her character questions the limited roles available to women and demonstrates that intelligence and personal integrity can be as valuable as social connections. Jane Austen explores gender schemas through her characters and their interactions. Set in the early 19th century, the novel reflects the rigid gender norms of its time, but also subtly critiques and undermines them. The novel shows how marriage is often considered a woman's most important role and a source of her social position. Characters such as Charlotte Lucas and Mrs. Bennet embody these social pressures and emphasize the need for a good marriage for women to ensure economic stability and social status. Austen uses these elements to critique and confront gender expectations, offering a nuanced perspective on how social norms shape personal relationships and individual identities.

In Victorian literature, gender roles were often strictly demarcated. Characters were often portrayed in roles that corresponded to their gender schema: men as breadwinners and leaders and women as homemakers and caregivers. This portrayal is evident in the works of Charles Dickens, in which female characters often embody virtues associated with femininity, such as passivity and devotion, while male characters are portrayed as assertive and dominant.

Literature also serves as a space to subvert and critique traditional gender norms. Modern and contemporary works often challenge established genre schemes by presenting characters who defy conventional expectations. For example, *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf explores gender fluidity through its protagonist, who changes gender throughout the story. Woolf uses this transformation to critique the rigid gender differences of her time, thus highlighting the performative nature of gender, and questioning the validation of gender schemas.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* offers a different perspective by showing how external pressures can change gender roles. Sethe, the protagonist, challenges traditional gender expectations imposed by the brutal reality of slavery. Her strength and determination challenge stereotypical notions of femininity and reveal a more complex and nuanced representation of gender that challenges the limitations of traditional gender schemas. The reflection of the theory of gender schemas in literature is strongly influenced by the social and historical context in which a work is created. As

gender norms evolve, so do literary representations of gender roles. For example, literature from the early 20th century, including works by feminist authors such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir, reflects a growing awareness of gender equality and challenges to traditional roles. These texts explore themes of female autonomy and critique patriarchal structures, reflecting broader social changes in attitudes toward gender.

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. (Beauvoir 330)

However, literature from earlier eras often reinforces stricter gender norms. For example, female characters in 19th-century novels often conform to domestic ideals, reflecting the limited roles available to women at the time. In contrast, literature of the late 20th and early 21st centuries increasingly represents diverse and non-traditional gender identities, reflecting contemporary understandings of gender as fluid and multifaceted.

Gender schema theory has significantly influenced literary criticism by providing tools to analyze how texts maintain or challenge gender norms. Feminist literary critics, for example, use gender schema theory to examine how literature reinforces traditional gender roles and stereotypes. They analyze how characters conform to or resist gender schemas and how these representations impact readers' gender perceptions.

For example, analyzing a novel through the lens of gender schema theory might involve examining how the protagonist's adherence to or deviation from gender norms affects his or her narrative progression. In works such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the examination of gender roles reveals how a dystopian society imposes extreme gender schemes to control and subjugate women, criticizing the ways in which gender norms can be manipulated to maintain the structures of power.

Reflecting gender schema theory in literature impacts readers and provides opportunities for critical engagement with gender norms. Exposure to diverse and nontraditional gender representations in literature can cause readers to question and reevaluate their own gender schemas. Literature provides the opportunity to explore alternative gender identities and experiences and promote empathy and understanding.

For example, reading works that depict non-binary or queer characters can challenge readers' preconceptions about gender and promote a more inclusive view of gender diversity. By engaging with texts that challenge traditional gender roles, readers can develop a more complete understanding of gender as a social construction rather than a fixed characteristic.

Examining specific literary works through the lens of gender schema theory provides concrete examples of how literature reflects and challenges gender norms. For example, "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman examines the impact of restrictive gender roles on women's mental health. The protagonist's descent into madness is a critique of the oppressive gender norms that confine her to domestic spaces and reflects a broader commentary on the limitations imposed by gender schemas. Similarly, James Baldwin's novel *Giovanni's Room* explores issues of sexuality and

identity, challenging traditional gender schemas by presenting complex representations of LGBTQ+ characters. The narrative examines the intersections between identity and social expectations and offers a critique of rigid gender norms.

Aldous Huxley's dystopian novel, *Brave New World*, examines how a highly controlled society enforces gender norms to ensure stability. The novel criticizes the commercialization of gender roles and the elimination of individuality and highlights the consequences of extreme adherence to gender schemas.

Gender schema theory provides a valuable framework for analyzing literature and understanding how gender roles and stereotypes are represented, reinforced, or challenged in literary texts. By thinking about how literature reflects social attitudes toward gender, we can better understand the persistence and evolution of gender schemas. At the same time, literature serves as a powerful tool to question and reshape these schemas, offering diverse and inclusive representations of gender. By exploring traditional and non-traditional gender roles, the literature not only reflects social norms but also contributes to current discourse on gender and identity.

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