THE PORTRAIT OF MASCULINITY IN ROALD DAHL’S THE BFG

Hening Ciptaningrum, Mochamad Nasrul Chotib
Email: hening.ciptaningrum@gmail.com; nasrulchotib@gmail.com
State University of Malang

Abstract: This study aims to show the portrait of masculinity in a children literature: The BFG written by Roald Dahl. Using masculinities theory by Connell (2005) as the basis of the study, some result concerning the relation of the characters in gender role, gender stereotype, and institution, the issue on male and masculinity is revealed. Though masculinity is varied, change, and relational, in the end the society still believe that belief that the practice and performance of masculinity by male is better and become a standard to other types of masculinity.

Keywords: The BFG, The BFG, masculinity, male, gender role, gender stereotype

A literary work not only has entertaining function, but also the education one in conveying the theme and its message to the audience. It also works the same as children’s literature which gives a great influence to the child readers regarding many social issues like gender. Crowle (2004) shows a quantitative data where most of children’s literatures in the mid of 20th century are dominated by male characters. It means that children’s literature has contributed many ideas about men and masculinity.

Additionally, a large number of gender analyses and criticism usually more concern about how women are oppressed by patriarchy system. The feminist’s movement which began in the western world in the late 19th century has declared their desire to get gender equality. They also said that women have been suffering under men domination. These cause gender stereotypes where men are seen as wrong sides who have misused their position to keep women under their feet. At a glance it seems like there are only women who become the victim of patriarchy and other gender issues. Nevertheless, men also become victim of their own gender (masculinity) and domination (patriarchy) where the society also takes a part in shaping and influencing the notion and practice of gender.

As one of the popular children’s literatures, The BFG by Roald Dahl can be seen as a social learning media for child readers in particular. First published in 1982, The BFG has got some awards. Dahl is known for his dark theme as written by de Castella (2011) in BBC News Magazine: “There's a persistent nastiness and brutality in Dahl and he lingers over their horrible appearances and habits”. That is why some people; especially parents think that his books are not appropriate for children. But an interesting different perspective appeared in a blog ‘What My Kids Read’ posted in 2012 which showing two opinions: the parents said that The BFG has bad language and grammar and also full of violence, while the kids supported it by saying that The BFG has many humorous thing that kids will enjoy.

Some studies have been conducted to analyze The BFG (stand for Big Friendly
Giant, a character in the story) like van Renen (1985) and Royer (1998). They study *The BFG* using sociological approach which ranges from the young protagonist who fights against adult authority. It seems like *The BFG* is not as popular as other Dahl books to be analyzed particularly from masculinity point of view. What makes this novel interesting is that the female character is portrayed as smart and also hold the highest authority in a society, but with the outweigh of male characters than female. Males here do not get more superiority since they are placed under females. Their image is ruined more where some gender stereotypes like being violence and evil are shown along with what society believes as the men’s role. In *The BFG*, doing masculinity for males is not easy, however they still become the first and main subject of masculinity since the society expect them for that. Based on the background of study above, this thesis hopes to answer the following question: How masculinity is portrayed in *The BFG*? This question later will lead to other questions such as whether the portrait of masculinity is negative or positive, supports or hurts men, and gives a new understanding or not.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

To analyze the portrait of masculinity in *The BFG*, some theories and thought will be used. We will begin with gender roles and stereotypes. Gender includes the social attributes associated with being a woman or a man in a particular society (Gove & Watt, 2000). Both gender (masculine and feminine) can be used to describe anything which has a quality to be either masculine or feminine too. Some people debate over the problem whether gender is nature (inborn factor) or nurture (socialization). Essentialism suggests that gender is a biological sex, by contrast, social constructionism suggests that gender is constructed within a social and cultural discourse (Xue, 2008). However, both theories are hardly to explain some cases like the third gender, LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, and Queer), and changing role position where people can do gender without merely refer to their biological condition and social construction only.

Our view on masculinity has been shaped by gender stereotypes which oversimplified our understanding about one’s gender. Gender stereotypes usually expect men to be self-confident, rational, aggressive, and have a tall and broad-shouldered body. Then it continues to gender roles as becoming a father, a construction worker, or a soldier. If we need to sum up, doing gender for a man means that he must be male who practices masculinity. To say that someone is masculine or feminine we cannot decide that only based on one point of view like essentialist or social constructionist. But, it is inevitable that biological condition influence the way society decides gender roles to men and women. History, culture, economic, and religion are some of the
aspects that influence the way gender is constructed.

The trouble that men should face is they have accustomed for being superior with the patriarchy system in gender relation until it causes men to be invisible, that is why to recognize the problem in masculinity is not easy. On the other hand, women and feminists also give their view that mostly put men in a wrong side. Thanks to the societal stereotypes, men can not show emotion, mental and physical weakness and playing of his role in society often leads to the cultivation of practices, which often negatively affect men's health directly, such as excessive competition, alcoholism, risky demonstration of masculinity through dangerous sport activities, etc (Institute of Historical Sciences Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, University of Pardubice, undated).

Generally, masculinity can be understood as the terms which are applied to the qualities typically attributed with male. In ancient literature the concept of masculinity is built with the term gods, heroes, and villains. From ancient masculinity to medieval, Victorian, and the modern one, masculinity is still centered on certain image such as strong, confidence, aggressive, rational, and violence. Connell (2005) says that we need at least a three-fold model of the structure of gender, by distinguishing relations of (a) power, (b) production and (c) cathexis (emotional attachment). R.W. Connell suggests us to use the term masculinities rather than masculinity to represent the differences and plurality. Connell (2005) also mentions four terms in relations among masculinities which are: hegemony, subordination, complicity, and marginalization.

In children’s literature itself, a male character usually becomes the central of the story, for example in Treasure Island (2005), and Hatchet (2007). Besides the male characters who act as the hero, other male supporting characters also play some typical roles such as Mr. Poe (in A Series of Unfortunate Events, act as banker, a guardian of Baudelaire’s children, and a father), Peter (a king as well as a prince in The Chronicles of Narnia), and headmaster (Dumbledore in Harry Potter). We can see that the position of male characters (major or minor) play a significant role in the story. Because of that, many people think there is no need to analyze male and masculinity in children’s literature. The fact that little is known about masculinity is concealed by men’s dominance in almost every aspect of life in society, which has led to masculinity being taken for granted, and unspoken notions of manliness being accepted as the ‘norm’ and ‘natural’ (Morrell in Thyssen, undated). This leads us to think that male and masculinity is unchanged, basically natural, and does not need be questioned.

In a literary work, character is important as an actor to rule the plot and conveys the theme and message in the story. Vladimir Propp developed a character theory after he analyzed at least 100 tales, which there are 7 broad character’s types in tales that could be applied to media. Not all narrative consists of the types that Propp (1928)
mentioned, but some of them usually include in most of narratives as follow: the hero, donor, the magical or helper, dispatcher, princess (usually a victim), villain, and the false hero. In some cases one character can play more than one role. The characters in the story also cannot be discharged from gender. For example it usually appears that the hero is masculine man and the woman will be the victim of the villain. Gender issue relation on character’s types depends on the story, so at first we should take them as an ordinary role which can be played by anyone and anything despite of the sex and gender.

Next, some studies have been conducted regarding the masculinity issue in children literatures. The first study comes from Harper (2007) who explores the nature and performance of masculinity portrayed in popular young adult novels featuring female protagonists relate with cross dressing in male and female characters. Considering the discursive construction of masculinity and biological point of view she argues that masculinity can be performed by both male and female. Second, Onyango (2007) talks about how masculinity is portrayed in African children’s literature. He pays attention in analyzing ideological and power basis of the masculinities in which are rooted in childhood by using discourse and hegemonic masculinity. The last study by Mallan (2001) examines the crisis identity of boys and men in contemporary writing for young people. In the end he suggests three different constructions of masculinity (termed herein as ‘antiheroic’, ‘transgressive’, and ‘hybrid’) as the alternative ways to see masculinity in real life.

In conclusion, masculinity as one of many social aspects has been shaping the fabrication of the society. The establishment of the ideal masculinity surely does not begin only recently, but it is embedded deep in our mind especially when we were child. These former studies analyze the representations of male-female and masculinity in literary works (both young and adult) and they are related to the analysis of The BFG which is going to conduct. As masculinity is complex it would be interesting to see how literary works reflect the way society see masculinity particularly in children’s literature.

ANALYSIS

This analysis starts from gender stereotypes that a man is bodily and mentally stronger, dominating women, and like to use violence. To know the portrait of masculinity we will see it from the characters relation (male-female and male-male), along with their roles and the social influence inside. It also needs to give some concerns that male usually is seen as the oppressor according to feminists and in this story we should consider some possibilities like oppression and other obstacles that
might be faced by male.

According to Srivastava (2012) patriarchy ‘makes’ men superior, while masculinity is the process of producing superior men. Masculinity is identical with patriarchy where male becomes superior and get many privileges more than female. In Connell (2005), gender structure of power relation is defined as women subordination to men, but here the male character is positioned under female. In patriarchy, it mostly said that male uses violence over female which resulting women oppression. We are wondering if male also fights against female authority, like what the feminists’ movement in patriarchal society. We also can expect that there will be some disagreements between male and female characters because their reverse position will affects the final decision.

The power relation that placed one is higher than another, for the BFG is more like an equal relation where both Sophie and the BFG are in the same line. Rather than sees his position as lower than Sophie, the BFG sees it as a debate with a friend over a ridiculous plan. He does not think about gender stereotype that a hero must be a masculine male. Sophie and the BFG do not only think about the plan, but also make it realizes into action. In the last chapter, (The Author: 204), the BFG gets his recognition from human being because of his hard work,” Every country in the world that had in the past been visited by the foul man-eating giants sent telegrams of congratulations and thanks to the BFG and to Sophie”. It shows heroism which is typically a masculine role cannot be achieved successfully without the alliance between male and female characters aside from their gender differences.

A leader position which is usually characterized with masculinity, in the story is played by female. In a monarchy system, a female become a queen because there is no males successor (prince), or even if they exist they cannot be chosen because the lack of ability to be a leader. Different from other British female leader like Elisabeth I, Queen Victoria, and Margaret Thatcher, the Queen here does not strongly show the masculine characters. Rather she is calm and showing the kindness of women than the firmness of men. The main highlight as the female characters portrayed here is that to not lose their femininity as being an emotional woman those also possessing motherly aspects apart from their role in the society.

Male sees that female is not and cannot be masculine as well as men. Therefore, such important position as being a country’s leader should not be held by female. The struggle over female leadership is shown by the Head of the Army and the Head of the Air Force attitude toward the Queen’s orders to them. Though it looks dishonest, the Head of the Army and the Head of the Air Force will appreciate women for the reason that they are the army who have a job to protect the society. They perform the order
which at the same time show their respect to the Queen as a female and a leader. They accept that female kindness is needed in that critical situation.

Men and masculinity try to cooperate with different side that is uncommonly showed in patriarchy by accepting the role of female and femininity as not only stuck in domestic field in the society. Again, we need to stress out that without men’s good cooperation and subordination, the Queen will fail as a leader. She will be regarded as a queen who cannot control her subordinate that it also means that her subordinate does not acknowledge her ability as a leader. Stets & Burke (2000) say, “The point is that people have viewed of themselves along a feminine-masculine dimension of meaning, some being more feminine, some more masculine, and some perhaps a mixture of the two”. Both Sophie and the Queen have fulfilled their role as heroine, leader, donor, and the dispatcher by concerning both biological and social matter. It also occurs for men, when the male characters try to face the opposite gender, there will be some struggles whether they must accept or against (reaction) the gender performance by female characters relate with the roles that they get.

The issue of violence on male and masculinity is a result of gender stereotypes and society’s construction where one lives. Being a masculine for men is the way to get acknowledged about their existence and ability. Fulfilling the gender role as military men laying on pride that have been taught from one generation to generation by parents and many social institution as well as in military. Male’s tendency to use violence as well as weapon is a legal action, allowed and thought in military institution to all its members. Men face a dilemma between their own safety as well as the need to prove themselves as a man, a soldier, and human being while performing the standard masculinity that depicted to them. In other word, military masculinity has ruled men to fit into certain standards which differentiate them with women and other job aside from becoming a soldier.

Whereas in the evil giants’ case, they persist to eat human being hence they are marked as villain. They might become the victim of their hyper masculine characteristics, but since they do not reflect to their mistake the nine evil giants are more suitable to be villains. In one hand, the society has already judged them over their physical and personality trait without thinking that the giants are actually just practicing what they believe as true and ‘normal’. The human’s fear over giants makes their action become more brutal than before. Since the human beings think in that way, why we do not meet their expectation too, that is what the giants might think. If human beings do not simply make stereotype as a temporary explanation, the giants may live along with human beings rather than eat them. However, as other children’s literatures there must be someone who acts as a hero and a villain in order to make
conflict progress as what narrative work do.

The effect of marginalization and complicity among male characters shows how giants are placed as the antagonist, enemy or villain, and victim. The BFG at first is seen as the same as the nine evil giants based on his physical appearance. Only from his appearance people already think that all giants are evil. This comes from the strong gender stereotype on physical appearance, which also shows that people are afraid toward something that is different from them. The society’s understanding that masculinity is natural has deeply affected how these giant stereotyping human beings and vice versa. Since the BFG decided to be a good giant and help human beings, he gets a happy life and does not mark as villain. Rather he is seen more as a victim who lives under evil giants’ pressure to be a hyper masculine giant and human’s distrust.

Besides, Connell (2000) quotes some data about male and masculinity where: high levels of victimization (men are the majority of victims of reported violence) and imprisonment (about 90% of prison inmates are men in countries like Australia and the USA); patterns of conflict among men that easily lead to violence (Tomsen 1997). All this time, males have been suffered from their own community as well as female attitude toward them. That is tragic, but the same pattern where male character dominate other still persist in many children’s literatures, though in some ways they should willingly accept the fact that their image is ruined. Still, the villain part is needed in order to make child’s readers learn that each role and action has its own consequences, whether to be a bad or kind person is a choice.

In The BFG, the numbers of female characters are less than the male characters. From the start, we can see that this novel shares similarity as other children’s literatures that the story is dominated by male characters. From Connell’s (2005) gender structure: power, production, and cathexis (emotional), the male characters and their masculinity get some advantages and disadvantages. Because of the society’s expectation on masculinity, males cannot express freely their feeling and their violence action is seen as a negative without seeing the reason behind it. They are placed as the villain and victim because of their masculinity. But, the gender relation that is shown between the characters emphasizes the unavoidable conflict that will still happen because of the sex and gender differences.

Therefore, the emotional support between two genders to cooperate and tolerate each other makes both side works really hard in completing their role and duty. Masculinity and femininity are inherently relational concepts, which have meaning in relation to each other, as a social demarcation and a cultural opposition (Connell, 2005). So, rather than blaming other upon sex and gender differences, in The BFG masculinity is portrayed as a learning process where the characters try to encounter self and other
masculinity through a reconciliation. Sophie and the BFG as the main characters have shown a great moral value to tolerate and cooperate with others in spite of their gender differences.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The BFG shows that masculinity is varied, change, and relational. It depends on one’s character behavior and attitude that is influenced by the environment (situation and condition) and the relation with other characters around his/her. It support male by showing the positive side of masculinity’s practice, while its negative portrait is functioned as the explanation of gender stereotype’s effect on masculinity. Although the female characters stand up to show their strength and excess they still need male as their subordinate. On the other hand, male characters are pressured to fulfill certain masculinity standards, which give them power and weakness at the same time. Luckily, the characters are given some spaces to change and cooperate with different masculinity according to situation, condition, and the role that they get.

In general, male is portrayed as strong, adventurous, independent, and capable while female is motherly, timid, conforming, and dependent. Domination of male characters not only give advantages but also disadvantages to male. The male’s position here is mainly based on their masculinity. Being violent and rational looks like the standard of one’s masculinity. All the negative issue like violence in The BFG will not harm children that much since it suggests two important things. First, it gives different perspective regarding the importance of tolerance in gender relation. Second, each role and gender performance gives its own consequences (whether it is good or bad) that one should accept. It means that we cannot simply blame male or masculinity only because there are so many aspects which are needed to consider one’s masculinity like female’s femininity and institution.

Nonetheless, the basic concept in understanding masculinity has not change yet. It is still directed for men, mostly practice by men, so that both side (male-female and masculinity-femininity) can fulfill their duty and responsibility in the society well. In this notion, most people still believe that the practice and performance of masculinity by male is better and become a standard to other types of masculinity. Instead of seeing masculinity as something that just happens to men or is done to men, masculinity is seen as something that men do (Coleman in Kriernert, 2003).

The complexity of gender construction in a society were hinted, but not explored with enough depth in the present study because of time limitations, but promise a rich topic for further research. The researcher hopes that this paper will lead to more in-depth study especially on masculinity and other aspects such as racism and nationality
that is shown in The BFG. As we head to the next generation, more criticism in children’s literature as one of unique cultural products is needed since most of them are written and seen from adult’s perspective.

Children’s literature is happened for the sake of children. Though Roald Dahl has passed away, his life experience from child to adult that influence most of his book still left a great impact for all his readers. One of the important thing is people should not forget that child’s reader has their own thought and concept in seeing the portrait of an issue or a phenomena in the books. Another approach also can be used like post colonialism or psychoanalysis approach to analyze the author views and the character further in the book as well as the response of the child and adult readers. Using different perspective deeper will create another excitement and a new understanding about a literary work that is mostly accepted as an entertainment.

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