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The Impact of Gender Stereotypes on Child Development: A Critical Analysis of the Feminist Movie *Dangal*

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ABSTRACT

Gender inequality, as a diverse issue in early childhood education, has been long debated worldwide, especially in some Asian countries with conventional sociocultural backgrounds, which could have an irreversible impact on children's future development. Based on critical analysis, this study will thus provide an insight into the impact of gender bias on children's development by dissecting the film "Dangal", which challenges decades of stereotypical roles of female like submissiveness and timidity in Indian films and endows women equal status with men to contend against patriarchy. From a feminist perspective, it will discuss how protagonists in the film break down preconceived stereotype of society's division between males and females and transcend prejudice, so as to deeply understand the influence of gender bias on children's development and provide suggestions for educators to implement in the future.

Keywords: Dangal, Feminist Movie, Gender inequality, Early Childhood Education, Diversity and Child development.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article critically analyses *Dangal (Wrestling competition)*, the highest-grossing sports movie in India and worldwide. It is based on a true story about Indian female wrestler Geeta Phogat's childhood experience.

1.1. A brief synopsis of the film Dangal

Geeta was born in India in the 1990s, and like millions of other girls, she expected to live a normal life. Geeta's father, Mahavir, a former wrestling champion who found his two daughters' wrestling skills by chance. He chose to train Geeta and Babita to become outstanding female wrestlers and win national honours. As a result, forcing girls to cut their long hair and remove their traditional saris to wrestle with boys were clearly "indecent manners." Mahavir defied Indian norms, rejected others' apathy and scorn, surmounted numerous obstacles and began rigorously training Geeta and Babita, as he did not want to waste their wrestling abilities.

Geeta and her sister disliked wrestling, since it deprived their sleep and long hair. However, an accidental opportunity changed their attitudes towards their father and wrestling; their mutual friend in her wedding, expressed her 'envy' to Geeta for owning a father like Mahavir, who was brave enough to break the prevailing gender inequality and encourage his daughters to have initiative in their own lives. In such a patriarchal society where most of women were doomed to take domestic responsibilities as housewives since they were very young without any chance to pursue their dreams; nevertheless, Mahavir insisted on supporting his daughters to make decisions on their own lives, despite ridicules and gossips from the neighbours, villagers, as well as the whole society. This conversation encouraged Geeta and Babita to comprehend their father's great love. After that, they began to learn and practice wrestling industriously, for Mahavir's sake and their determination to fight against the gender stereotypes within the Indian society.

After continuous efforts and overcoming difficulties and pressures, Geeta eventually won the women's wrestling gold medal in the 2010 Commonwealth Games. Although there seemed to be a disparity in strength between Geeta and the opponent, Geeta firmed the belief in winning under the encouragement of Mahavir. Mahavir told her that she was fighting against everyone all over the world who despised women.

Therefore, Geeta fought not only for herself, but also for millions of other women who yearned for gender equality. Due to an accident, Mahavir was unable to provide technical guidance to Geeta in the final round. However, Geeta's steadfast faith made her reverse the adversity at the last minute and won the first wrestling gold medal in Indian history. Geeta's victory, supported by her father, was not only a triumph of fate, but also an encouragement to all women who were regarded inferior to men and compelled to spend their whole lives at home with pots and pans.

1.2. Rationale for choosing Dangal to discuss diversity of childhood

Various factors influenced Geeta's childhood experiences in this film, such as social expectations, customs and traditions, and poverty. The topic "How gender stereotypes affect Geeta's childhood" will be discussed in this paper, as it is not only a long-standing problem in India, but also a concern for children's development worldwide. Many countries nominally claim to respect gender equality in education by publishing relevant provisions [1]; however, stereotypical gender discourses still commonly exist when the sex-gender system imposes different expectations on men and women [2].

Taking my own childhood experience as an example, my parents assigned me an overwhelming girl's role as the only child of the family. All 'girly stuff' was prepared for me by them, such as buying pink dresses and Barbies. They even determined my future career by saying "teacher is the best job for girls". My parents' behaviours overlapped with Raley and Bianchi's argument [3], that is, although they acknowledge that children should be treated in gender-equal ways, parents may still unconsciously raise their children with stereotypes. From my perspective, the socialization of Asian culture shapes the 'good girl' image, leading me undoubtedly to take these 'girls' features for granted.

In the global educational system, policies and initiatives have been published to acknowledge the importance of gender equalities. For example, the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework provides prospects on encouraging gender equity and safeguarding children from gender bias, either directly or indirectly [4]. However, professional documents appear to be devoid of concrete measures to alleviate gender inequality [5]. Therefore, the current educational constitutions and my childhood story related to gender norms developed my interest in analysing the film *Dangal* by exploring the effects of gender stereotypes on children's future development.

2. DISCUSSION

2.1. An overview of gender stereotype in early childhood education

Gender stereotype refers to the application of a gender behavioural model to people who are classified as a certain gender role, which has both nature and nurture basis [6]. From the perspective of nature, male and female are biologically and fixedly opposed to each other, with distinctions in bodies, brains, genes and hormones [7]; from the perspective of nurture, gender stereotypes are social constructs that compel people to "adapt to" stereotypical societal roles and behaviours with feminine or masculine characters [2]. Men are considered as powerful, supporting sustenance for the entire family, whereas women are regarded as weak and gentle, taking nurturing and caring roles [6] [7].

Gender stereotypes have become normalized in many cultures and their educational systems. In view of genetic and hormonal differences in male and female brain development, children are more likely to form gender stereotypes [8]. Such a discourse consequently leads their gender stereotypical preferences to become "a natural expression of biological difference", with boys preferring physical activities such as fighting and tree climbing, while girls opting for quieter activities such as reading and role-play games [2].

In Southeast Asia, where the conventional patriarchy and gender roles are entrenched in raising children, it is common for parents to send their daughters to single-sex schools to shield them from "contamination" by boys [6] [9]. In fact, such a phenomenon also occurs in some Western countries. Many girls are sent to female exclusive schools, where they follow subtly different curriculum and sports activities with separate learning objectives and standards from coeducational or boys-only schools [9]; these 'normalized' perspectives and approaches are intended to protect girls, who are biologically regarded 'vulnerable'. However, these stereotypes have long-term effects on children's awareness of gender equality and gender identities.

2.2. How do gender stereotypes influence children's development?

Notwithstanding the genes and hormones, children's acquired nurturing and individual experiences play the most critical roles in their development, which means that children are heavily shaped by role models from family members, teachers, and communities by accepting sociocultural expectations from surroundings and formulating their gender behaviours [10]. Therefore, a gender-divided environment could restrict children's mental and physical development, as such

negative and stereotyped information places limits on their expected actions [11].

On the one hand, children who do not adhere to "proper" gender roles are more likely to be rejected by their peers or even penalized by adults if they fail to show their inherent masculine and feminine traits [2]. Consequently, children's emotional health and well-being could be long-term influenced by surrounding gender stereotypes. Meanwhile, girls, who are often considered as weak and innocent, may be entitled to more safeguards and limitations than boys. Despite its good intentions, this trend can lead to a submissive mentality with an inferiority complex among girls this trend will lead to the development of a submissive mentality with an inferiority complex in girls [2].

On the other hand, different cultural comprehensions and expectations on gender may also impact on children's future career choice. In modern society, especially in early childhood, gender division is still evident. As Breneselovic and Krnjaja (2016) claim [1], the dominance of female early childhood teachers exposes the mainstream biased discourses of teachers' role is still the 'family replacement' to take care of children, since this is regarded as women's natural expertise. In this context, children are more likely to form biased views on gender roles through observation, interaction and role modeling [12].

Moreover, subjects in school curriculums are usually divided along gender lines and children may express their preferences to align with their gender characteristics. Physics, for example, is deemed as a masculine scientific discipline whereas biology has more feminine overtones [13]. Consequently, a wider gender inequality will continue to exist in children's learning environments, impacting on their future career paths and employment opportunities.

3. ANALYSIS

3.1. How does gender stereotyping affect Geeta's development?

The film *Dangal* reveals the deep-rooted tradition of gender inequity in Indian society in the late twentieth century, and Geeta's experience echoes the real-life issues in early childhood education. Girls are expected to be mothers and carers of children and families in a typical patriarchal culture, where women are socially and economically inferior [2]. Such a stereotypical belief is prevalent in Indian society, exemplified through the disappointment of Mahavir since girls cannot inherit their masculine careers and dreams. Therefore, Geeta and Barbita as girls are not endowed with high expectations on their studies and future careers. As Herbert and Stipek (2005) [14] declare, children can habitually self-assess their own gender

norms by naturally understanding the gender-related attitudes and prospects of their families and communities; Geeta thus defines herself as an ordinary girl with the same fate as all other women in her village, which eventually leads a life with little power to make independent choices. In the film, there are few voices from women who challenge this gender inequality, since they accept such patriarchal values as their social rules. This silence uncovers that the rigid and engrained gender stereotype from patriarchy potentially confines children's imagination and future development [6].

3.2. What changes Geeta's childhood experience?

Unlike many scholars attempt to tackle the issue from pedagogical standpoints, this film providesoffers a fresh perspective to the audience and early childhood educators to emphasize the significance of parental involvement in children's development. Even though the conservative gender biases in the community hinders Geeta's aspirations to be strong and independent, Mahavir firmly acknowledges his daughters' strength when Geeta and Babita defeat some boys in a physical conflict. This occurrence becomes a turning point in the film as well as Geeta's fate, when her father Mahavir realizes that girls can pursue the same achievement as boys.

Mahavir's tenacity in defying gender stereotypes is the key factor in Geeta's childhood transformation. Mahavir uses his powerful hand to break the social "rules" of gender norms and remove secular barriers in a patriarchal society by encouraging his daughters to pursue equal rights. Even though some critics indicate that Mahavir's autocratic disciplining can be regarded as another type of male-dominance; he did challenge patriarchy and succeed in providing his daughters with power and rights. Thus, Mahavir as a 'practitioner', discussed by Naughton (2003) [15], contributes to the revision of gender views by acting as an agent of social transformation through increasing individual opportunities. Although there is little involvement and support from schools and educators in this film, Geeta successfully breaks through the gender stereotypical boundaries and the subservient role of females with the strong encouragement and assistance from her father.

3.3. How do parenting styles influence gender stereotypes on children?

The diversity issues Geeta encountered during her childhood were the traditional gender biases prevailing in her community. Fortunately, her father expressed his resistance to the patriarchal system through applying an autocratic and strict parenting style to forge Geeta's strong and independent personalities. Such a parenting style from Mahavir was controversial since he was

criticized whether it was suitable to force his daughters to practice wrestling, something Geeta thought to be reluctant to do.

Some researchers from the Western educational philosophy argue that dominant, required and authoritative parenting styles could have a negative impact on children's hostile development [16] [17]. However, others support this style, claiming that achievements of parenting styles could be diverse in different cultural groups [18]. Some positive effects by using authoritarian parenting styles have been proved in some Asian countries [16]. Since Mahavir's family live in an Indian village with high patriarchy, gender stereotypes are extremely challenging to resist. As a result, Mahavir's autocratic discipline seems to be the only way to impulse and assist Geeta to achieve the equality with men and control of her own life. Therefore, Geeta's success demonstrates the feasibility of authoritative parenting style in certain situations.

4. CONCLUSION

The feminist context in *Dangal* alluded to the negative impact of gender stereotypes on children's future development. 'Normalizing' gender attitudes, whether conscious or unconscious, always exist in children's families, schools, and communities, and can have an impact on children's personality development and career trajectories.

Many educators, constrained by their own entrenched gender discourses, regarding the diverse play preferences of boys and girls as "natural manifestations of biological differences." [19]. Therefore, these educators may be confused while facing with some occasions that contradict to their own gender cognition However, educators should reflect their own gender discourse by actively questioning their educational practices, which could challenge gender stereotypes [1].

In addition, the role of families as a powerful source in influencing children's early development should never be overlooked. Parents' positive attitude towards gender awareness could unwittingly serve as a role-model on children's gender construction. As Robinson and Diaz [1] claim, educators could regularly organize community workshops, parent-teacher meetings, newsletters, and forums on gender equity issues to evoke parents' awareness on gender identity and develop their knowledge on gender diversity.

Furthermore, it is necessary to regularly keep track of evaluating existing policies and educational practices with professionals, families, communities and authorities. Taking Australian Educational policies as an example, the Early Years Learning Framework of Australia [EYLF] aims to foster an inclusive learning environment by fostering diverse classrooms that support children's sense of identity; however, it lacks practical solutions to address issues with gender differences to promote gender equality [11]. Consequently, it is necessary for educators to collaborate with both professionals and families to jointly contribute to modify and develop relevant policies to achieve a gender-equity learning environment; on the other hand, educators are responsible to reflect on their own gender attitudes and identities. It is still a long distance to defeat gender stereotypes and 'normalizing' discourses in early childhood education, thus educators need to support many girls like Geeta, who look forward to being inspired to achieve their due rights and decide their own lives.

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