

A BRIEF OVERVIEW ON GENDER REPRESENTATION OF MONSTER ANIMAL CHARACTERS IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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***Abstract:** This study investigates the representation of gender in monster animal characters in children's literature from a comparative viewpoint. These non-human characters frequently embody culturally constructed gender norms. It is generally accepted that authors make deliberate and strategic choices in the construction of their characters. Currently, in particular, these choices often reflect a conscious effort to challenge and subvert traditional gender stereotypes.*

In this research we examine a corpus of English and Romanian children's works covering various literary periods and genres with the aim of exploring the way gendered traits, roles and behaviours were assigned to non-human characters. Particular attention is given to linguistic indicators, visual characterisation and mechanisms through which gender identity is constructed. Additionally, we analyse the rate of occurrence of male vs female monster animal characters and male vs female pronouns. Particular attention is given to the ways translators trade off linguistic creativity, sound symbolism, naming conventions and cultural references associated with these characters.

***Keywords:** children's literature; gender representation; monster characters; animal characters; narrative discourse analysis; translation.*

The gender dimension in the children's literature has received limited attention in the research conducted in this part of the world, therefore, it constitutes a particularly relevant area of inquiry and is likely to be of comparable interest to scholars worldwide. While children's books are generally considered beneficial for young readers, playing a significant role in shaping children's understanding of gender, they often reinforce subtle gender stereotypes and as presented in *Does Gender in Children's Books Matter?*, children's books still show gender bias [6, p. 34]. For example, their characters frequently convey assumptions about masculinity and femininity, even if these ideas are not explicitly stated in the text. For children engaging with these stories, such cues may be understated yet highly influential. Furthermore, S. Gilbert and S. Gubar emphasize the significance of considering the gender of the author as well, arguing that male authors often shape female characters according to male-defined masks and costumes and in such works, women are typically

exaggeratedly feminine, submissive and passive, thereby reinforcing patriarchal structures. The authors further explain that women in these texts are generally cast into two roles: “the angel”, who conforms to patriarchal norms, or “the monster”, who resists them [1].

J.J. Cohen states in his work *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, “The woman who oversteps the boundaries of her gender role risks becoming a Scylla, Weird Sister, Lilith (‘die erste Eva’, ‘la mere obscure’), Bertha Mason, or Gorgon. ‘Deviant’ sexual identity is similarly susceptible to monsterization.” Thus, overstepping equals becoming a monster, which is particularly attributed to women in patriarchal cultures. These treat transgressive women as monsters because they step outside patriarchal norms, namely the roles prescribed to them [2, p.17].

In our study we rely on the premise that gender in literature is shaped through recurring narrative patterns rather than overt declarations. We think that in children’s literature, these patterns are frequently reflected in characters’ roles, determining who assumes leadership, who provides care, who poses threats and who undergoes transformation. An additional analytical perspective is provided when children’s books include monsters as characters. Viewed as figures of excess and transgression, they often embody that which a society struggles to classify. When an animal takes on monstrous qualities, it moves beyond mere “nature” and becomes symbolic. Introducing gender into this dynamic produces characters that can either reinforce traditional roles or subvert them in surprising ways. Thus, anthropomorphism adds another layer of complexity. For instance, a wolf that wears clothes and talks like a human can be readily assigned a gender, whereas a creature that is only partially human inhabits a more ambiguous space. It is within this ambiguity that nuanced and innovative representations of gender are most likely to arise. Therefore, in this article, we will briefly examine different approaches to the monster, its portrayals, and the way gender shapes, influences and complicates its representation across cultural and linguistic contexts.

In recent years, a growing body of research has highlighted the significant influence of children’s literature on the formation of their attitudes and beliefs regarding gender roles and expectations. Although there has been some progress, gender inequality in children’s literature persists. Even with a rise in female protagonists in recent years, studies indicate that their portrayal is often superficial and limited in diversity.

At the beginning of his novel “Scary stories to tell in the dark”, the American author and journalist A. Schwartz explains that “telling scary stories is something people have done for thousands of years, for most of us like being scared in that way. Since there isn’t any danger, we think it is fun. There are a great many scary stories to tell. There are ghost stories. There are tales of witches, devils, bogeymen, zombies, and vampires. There are tales of monstrous creatures and of other dangers. There even are stories that make us laugh at all this scariness” [9, p.2] highlighting that children’s literature often presents an unusual blend of fear, joy and amusement, frequently embodied in the figure of a monster. Across history, monsters have appeared in a wide range of forms, from fearsome figures intended to convey moral lessons to more imaginative beings that mirror the complexities of human soul and

mind. In children's literature, a monster can be a warning monster with some danger, a friendly monster that can go on an adventure with children, or a monster that appears in a bedtime story with little threat [11, p.12]. Although monsters may be classified in a variety of ways, some of the features remain common: the size, shape, physical appearance, strength, behaviour and habitat. Most of the monsters in children's literature have animal features such as horns, sharp teeth, fur, claws and tusks [11, p. 17]. Moreover, monsters are often constructed from various elements of multiple beings, combining animal with another animal, mix living with the dead, or even combine human and animal elements [5, p.189]. A good example in this case would be the Jabberwock – a fictional “portmanteau” monster character from the L. Carroll's novel *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871).

Monster animal characters not only play very specific roles but also occupy a unique place in children's literature. As put in K. Marciniak's work *Chasing Mythical Beasts* (2020), psychologists consider our early fascination with monsters to be a natural stage in cognitive and emotional development [7, p. 25]. They are strange enough to invite imagination, yet familiar enough to carry meaning and they act as subtle vehicles for gender norms: sometimes, they uphold them and at other times, they challenge them.

Animal monsters in children's literature can be usefully classified into several broad types, depending on their function, form and narrative role. For instance, some books display predatory monsters – animal-like creatures defined by danger and the idea that they hunt or prey on others (the boggart, from the English folklore). They often adopt the traits of wolves, snakes, or sea creatures, being used in stories to create suspense or fear. Another category consists of creatures that blend human and animal traits, often helping explore ideas of identity, transformation and what it means to belong to more than one world (*The Gruffalo*). The least encountered monster animal characters are the ones referring to the caregiving monsters, one example being Grendel's mother in *Beowulf* (10-11th century), who, according to R. Fahey, has long been regarded by scholars as the least horrific of the three monsters in the poem: not being an obvious vampire-cannibal like Grendel nor a fire-breathing dragon [3]. And the final category encompasses animal monsters characterised more by cunning or manipulation, like Cluny the Scourge from *Redwall* series (1986-2011) or Smaug from *The Hobbit* (1937).

The English-language children's literature offers a rich variety of monster animal characters, many of which complicate traditional gender roles. M. Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) provides a useful starting point. The Wild Things themselves are large, horned and vaguely animalistic, yet they are not clearly gendered as individuals. Their collective behaviour suggests a kind of untamed emotional world rather than a gendered hierarchy. For a child reader, this ambiguity can feel liberating: the monsters are not “boys” or “girls”, but something more expansive. A more clearly gendered example can be found in J. Donaldson's *The Gruffalo* (1999). The Gruffalo, a hybrid creature with tusks, claws and a terrifying reputation, is typically read as male, although the text does not explicitly insist on it. Interestingly, the truly active and clever character is the small mouse, often interpreted as gender-neutral or even female-coded in some adaptations (i.e. the mouse and Gruffalo are

male characters in the Romanian version, while in the French translation, the mouse is a female character). In C. Cowell's *How to Train Your Dragon* series (2003-2015), dragons are given a wide range of personalities and, importantly, genders. Female dragons are not confined to nurturing roles; they can be fierce, unpredictable and independent. At the same time, male characters, including the human protagonist, display sensitivity and doubt. The relationship between humans and dragons becomes a space where rigid masculinity is softened.

Female monsters often manifest aggression, strength and brutality, which are traits typically associated with men. This dynamic reinforces patriarchal double standardisation: while women monsters' strength is seen as a destructive obstruction, male monsters' strength is often interpreted as a transformation or renewal. In particular, the monstrous feminine in the works of L. Carroll and R. Dahl highlights transgressive women who combine female beauty – sometimes described as angelic – with ferocious, aggressive behavior. This duality, in which beautiful appearance contrasts with ruthless behavior, is one of the most prominent monstrous-feminine stereotypes present in children's literature [10, p.5].

What emerges from these examples is a pattern of experimentation. English-language texts often allow monster animal characters to stretch or blur gender expectations, even if visual cues sometimes pull them back towards convention. A detailed study of the 100 most popular children's picture books of 2017 shows that male characters overwhelmingly dominate, frequently occupying stereotypically masculine roles, while female characters are entirely absent in one-fifth of the books. The lead characters were 50% more likely to be male than female and male villains were eight times more likely to appear compared to female villains [4].

The Romanian children's literature, particularly that influenced by folklore, presents a different picture: monster animal characters are often tied to moral lessons and their gender roles tend to be more clearly defined. In traditional tales, various animal creatures are frequently male and associated with danger, chaos, or testing the hero. These figures are obstacles to be overcome and their masculinity is often linked to strength and aggression. For instance, in adaptations of folk narratives involving animalistic adversaries, the male monster is typically opposed by a brave (often male) hero. Female characters, when present, are more likely to be victims, helpers, or symbols of reward. Female monster animals are comparatively rare and when they do appear, they are often connected to transformation. However, there are moments that complicate this pattern. In some modern Romanian children's books, authors have begun to reimagine these figures. A once-threatening animal may become misunderstood rather than evil; a female creature may take on an active, even rebellious role. These reinterpretations are still emerging, but they suggest a growing openness to alternative gender representations.

One of the most prominent female monsters in Romanian literature, particularly in folktales, is Muma Pădurii, which translates literally as "The Mother of the Forest". She is a forest spirit, an old, hideous woman who lives in a dark and dreadful place and threatens children, or even eats them. While there are numerous legends about her, she remains a

female figure rooted in evil that scares children, making them aware not to venture too far into the forest and disturb its stillness [8, p.100].

One particularly interesting shift can be seen in stories where the “monster” is befriended rather than defeated. In such narratives, the creature’s gender becomes less important than its emotional world. A shy, oversized animal that fears rejection may resonate strongly with children, regardless of whether it is coded as male or female.

Placing these traditions side by side reveals both contrasts and shared possibilities. English-language texts, especially contemporary ones, tend to treat monster animal characters as spaces of experimentation. Gender can be fluid, ambiguous, or deliberately subverted. Romanian texts, shaped by folklore and didactic traditions, have historically been more conservative, assigning clearer and more rigid roles. Yet the difference is not absolute. Both traditions are changing, and both contain internal diversity. Importantly, in both contexts, monster animal characters allow for a certain emotional honesty. A roaring beast can express anger; a giant creature can feel loneliness; a “scary” animal can need friendship. These emotional dimensions often cut across gender expectations.

From a reader’s perspective, these moments matter. In children’s literature, the scarcity of female characters in central roles and their underrepresented experiences reinforce gender stereotypes and limit portrayals of women, however, when child who sees a powerful female monster or a gentle male creature is being offered a broader emotional vocabulary. Conversely, repeated exposure to narrowly defined roles may reinforce limiting expectations.

The comparison between various works underscored the significance of cultural context, while also pointing to a shared potential. Authors continue to experiment with form and characterisation, and therefore, monster characters might be assigned important roles as figures through which children can explore and make sense of the complexities of identity. Ultimately, what matters is not only how these creatures are construed, but how they are read. A child may see in a horned, furry, or fire-breathing character something deeply recognisable: fear, courage, curiosity, or the desire to belong. In that moment, the question of gender may not disappear but it becomes part of a larger, more imaginative conversation. What is also important is to acknowledge the impact of male writings on girlhood and womanhood, which are likely to portray females as limited in what they do or as less competent at achieving their goals. Accepting gender democracy in children’s literature is yet another key step in defying patriarchal conventions about gender roles in society.

For the present study, we identified the most popular English-language children’s books on Goodreads that feature at least one animal-like monster (*Where the Wild Things Are*, *Green Eggs and Ham*, *The Poisoned King*, *Strange Animals*, *The Gruffalo* etc.). Some of the creatures have distinct personalities and are referred to with he/him, she/her, or they/them, depending on how the narrator perceives them, while in other works, the creatures are generally referred to with plural pronouns like “they,” “them,” and “their”. There are cases when the majority of fantastical creatures are referred to collectively with neutral pronouns (they/them). Romanian translations often retain gender pronouns when the original

story uses gendered characters. Traditional Romanian monsters in folktales are mostly male when they are villainous or monster-like, while female supernatural creatures exist but are less often the central “monster” protagonist (Striga, a bird-like female demon in the Romanian mythology or Scorpia and Ghenoaia in *Eternal Life and Everlasting Youth* by P. Ispirescu – when such monsters display some human forms as well, their physical appearance reveals their dreadful nature; they are portrayed as hideous beings with various deformities). This pattern mirrors English children’s literature where monsters are predominantly male-coded. Both cultures show a strong gender bias in monster depiction: male monsters are the default, reinforcing traditional gender coding. Feminine monsters or protagonists are rare. Translating such works is a balancing process that demands constant trade-off between playfulness and clarity.

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