

# CONSTRUCTING CHILDHOOD AS A GENDERED IDENTITY: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF FAIRY TALES AND CHILDREN'S STORIES

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20552032>

Received	Accepted	Published
07 April 2026	19 May 2026	05 June 2026

## ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is the discursive construction of gendered childhoods using a critical discourse analysis approach. The study concentrates on the discourse operation to build, in a normalizing way, and sustain gendered identity through language, visual representation, and arrangement of narrative. The study applies critical discourse analysis and gender performativity and feminist media theory to understand the ideology of masculinity and femininity that is constructed from the selected stories. The findings suggest that gender identities are systematically created through patterned language choices, visual coding, and story placement as a means to reinforce hegemonic gender norms. Although in recent representations, there is a move towards more agentic figures of female characters, these are still embedded in discursive structures that reproduce inequality. This research paper, which is set in a Pakistani social-cultural context, highlights the interaction of the spread and globalization of children's stories and the local gender norms in the socialization of gendered identities. This paper goes beyond description of the representation of children in the media and demonstrates how the media functions as a space of ideological production for children. The research contributes to the critical discourse studies of feminism, particularly in the Pakistani context, and draws attention to the importance of critically analyzing the textual discourses on children as formative cultural products.

**Keywords:** Gender Roles, Discourse Analysis, Fairy Tales, Children's Literature, Discourse.

## Introduction

Children's literature and fairy tales are not innocuous cultural products, but an ideological space of production, dissemination, and reproduction of gender meaning(s). Representation has been a battleground for feminism as it is a key element in the social construction of femininity and masculinity in early socialization (Butler, 1990; Zipes, 2011). Storytelling in history has created a binary gendered world where masculine is synonymous with strength, power, assertiveness, and feminine with beauty, subservience, and passivity (Warner,

1995). The repeated imagery not only mirrors but is a contributor to social reality through the act of naturalization and legitimization of gender inequalities and their incorporation into mainstream culture (Davies, 2003). As these stories are read repeatedly, they help to normalize gender differentiation as if it is always natural (Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003).

The fairy tales tend to be viewed as stories, but the transmission of this ideology by animated films in the modern period increases the impact of the story. Animations are a gender stereotype genre that reiterates gender norms through language,

visuality, and body. Literary representations are verbal, but visual media involve both verbal and nonverbal components and enhance the meanings of gender. Children's animation is thus an important arena through which gender socialization occurs, continually recreating stereotyped gender identities (England et al., 2011; Towbin et al., 2004). Storylines send messages about gender in behavioral and visual aspects, and these messages influence children's conceptions of agency, emotion, and power (Signorielli, 2001).

The media socialization research indicates that repeated seeing of these representations helps to cement the roles and dominant ideologies of gender (Thorne, 1993). As a Pakistani female researcher my interpretations of the meanings of gender representation are influenced by dominant socio-cultural practices, where perceptions of gender are impacted by traditional gender roles. Feminist epistemology has developed to claim that knowledge is socially constructed and that reflexivity (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991) is a factor. Media and narratives in Pakistan also contribute to the reaffirmation of patriarchal norms, such as the image of an obedient woman and an authoritarian man (Kiran et al., 2024; Shahnaz, 2023). In the same way, alternative gender constructions brought by global animation may clash with local expectations, leading to an imbalance in the process of forming identities.

While there has been considerable research on gender in fairy tales (Warner, 1995; Zipes, 2011), this research tends to consider the texts as static and concentrate primarily on the definition and identification of stereotypes. Similarly, animated movie studies have mainly focused on content analysis and the categorization of characters, instead of discourse and ideology (England et al., 2011; Towbin et al., 2004). Despite the rising number of women in leadership positions, narrative power and authorship are still primarily male (Woodsmall & Hare, 2022). Meanwhile, gender significance is constantly changing as a result of socio-cultural shifts (Jabar et al., 2024).

The findings of recent research indicate that children's media is reproducing and challenging the dominant gender ideology using different representations of identity (Clarke & Hine, 2024). Language, images, and narrative form are

intertwined to create perceptions of identity and agency (Shen & Li, 2025). Yet, a better integration of Critical Discourse Analysis is lacking to consider how these multimodal elements work together to create gendered subjectivities at the text level, discursive level, and social level. The current research is thematic and qualitative, which helps in comprehending the overall discourse through which the gender ideologies can be produced, reproduced, and institutionalized at the textual, discursive, and social levels.

### Problem Statement

Existing local or international scholarship has emphasized that the discursive construction of gender is a complex process, within a specific location, in this case, the Global South context in which local cultural values can meet with global influences, such as Pakistan (Kiran et al., 2024; Shaheen et al., 2019). Furthermore, the studies conducted in Pakistan have been descriptive in nature and have not yet employed Critical Discourse Analysis. This research is an attempt to fill this gap by analyzing the representation and contestation of gender roles in some animated fairy-tale films using the Critical Discourse Analysis approach. Analysis of *Brave* (2012), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) shifts attention not only from the descriptive approach, but also to a critical analysis of the multidimensionality of discourse in text and discourse and society.

Gender roles have been widely studied in global research, particularly with regard to language, narrative elements, and symbolism (Zipes, 2011; Warner, 1995). However, in the studies on Pakistan, children's media have not been analyzed using CDA. Typical images of masculinity and femininity are mostly manifested in local studies, which are dominated by women as passive, obedient, and sacrificing, while men are dominant and authoritative (Kiran et al., 2024; Shaheen et al., 2019). Although these studies are important, they are often descriptive and do not delve into the complexities of discourse in its multidimensionality and how it forms gendered identities.

The novelty of the current study lies in the integrated analysis of the traditional and

contemporary animated media based on a framework of CDA from Fairclough. This study examines Cinderella, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, and Brave reflexively and from a culturally situated perspective. This current study is designed to investigate the linguistic and visual representation of masculine and feminine, and their mediacy in children's interpretations of gender roles in a particular socio-cultural environment.

### Research Questions

1. What are the linguistic, narrative, and visual depictions of the idea of masculinity and femininity in selected fairy tales and animated films?
2. How the discursive patterns are reiterating and challenging dominant gender ideologies in narratives?
3. What are the dimensions underpinning some representations of femininity and masculinity, and how do they link to other socio-cultural and ideological structures?

### Literature Review

Fairy tales and children's stories are well-known as robust cultural stories and as a key ingredient of children's social roles, values, and identity. Far from being innocent forms of entertainment, such narratives play a role as discursive spaces where gender ideologies are constructed and legitimized through language, symbolism, and narrative structure. The knowledge of the traditional fairy tale continues to foster an understanding of its role in perpetuating traditional stereotypes of femininity as passive, beauty and submission, and masculinity as power, action, and authority, gained during the feminist studies of the seventies to the nineties (Warner, 1995; Zipes, 2011).

Recent research builds on this concept and shows the internalization and universality of gender stereotyping in children's stories. For instance, critical discourse analysis reveals that the use of language, the positioning of characters, and the narrative structure of a text reflect the gender inequality (Aoumeur, 2022). In a similar fashion, semiotic and discourse analysis reveal that gender ideology is not only present in language but also in how children are exposed to symbols or stories

that reflect gender ideologies as well (Nasir et al., 2023). The latest studies also show that female characters are associated with emotions, support, and a helpless nature, whereas male characters are more active, leading, and decisive (Al-Gailany et al., 2025).

Qualitative methods have been employed to analyze the gender bias in fairy tales, and corpus-based methods give quantitative evidence of gender bias in cultural narratives. The results of these studies show that male characters tend to be more numerous and linked to active responsibilities, while female characters are linked to domestic responsibilities, physical appearance, and feelings (Zhou et al., 2022). Gender bias, thus, isn't an accident, but a cyclical process. Interdisciplinary studies also reveal that even in the new media, such as stories created by artificial intelligence, there are still gendered patterns and stereotypes (Roeein et al., 2025).

In children's media and education, studies of discourse have started to center on institutional and cultural discourses in gender socialization. For example, in the study of textbooks of Pakistan, males are linked to professional roles and leadership positions, whereas females are limited to their domestic and supportive roles (Rashid et al., 2025). Similarly, findings of CDA of fairy tales demonstrate that gendered meaning is created by using subtle discourse strategies that reinforce traditional gender roles and gender inequality (Gul & Baig, 2025).

However, there are some important gaps that need to be addressed. First, most literature, particularly in Pakistan, is descriptive and is concerned with the identification of stereotypes as opposed to discursive processes. Secondly, the general focus is on a few aspects of contemporary narration, specifically animated films, which combine language, image, and narration to shape gendered identities. Third, global media texts have not yet been reflexively and culturally analyzed.

The present study is a contribution to sociological and feminist studies by employing Critical Discourse Analysis in theoretical and methodological perspectives. It investigates, looking past the surface, the selected fairy tales and animated films to explore how discourse at the level of the text, practices, and the social space

creates and constructs gendered identities and how they are negotiated. It provides an analytically and contextually rich description of gender in children's stories.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study aims to provide an integrated conceptual and analytical framework of current feminist theories and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) for analyzing gender roles in children's animated films and children's fairy tales. Theory of gender performativity (1990) by Judith Butler, suggests that gender is not a natural nor an inherent identity, but a repetition of discourse, practice, and action. So femininity and masculinity are continually reproduced and sustained in the reiteration of socially-normed norms, expressed in language, visuality, and narrative. Media was chosen as one of the important sites in the current study because in the media, gender is performed, stereotyped, normalized, and naturalized as character types, actions, and symbolism. From this foundation, feminist media theory (Gill, 2007) and postfeminist cultural analysis (Banet-Weiser, 2018) offer insights into the cultural landscape, and how media is a site of gendered power relations and how meanings are not only reproduced but negotiated, and sometimes contested.

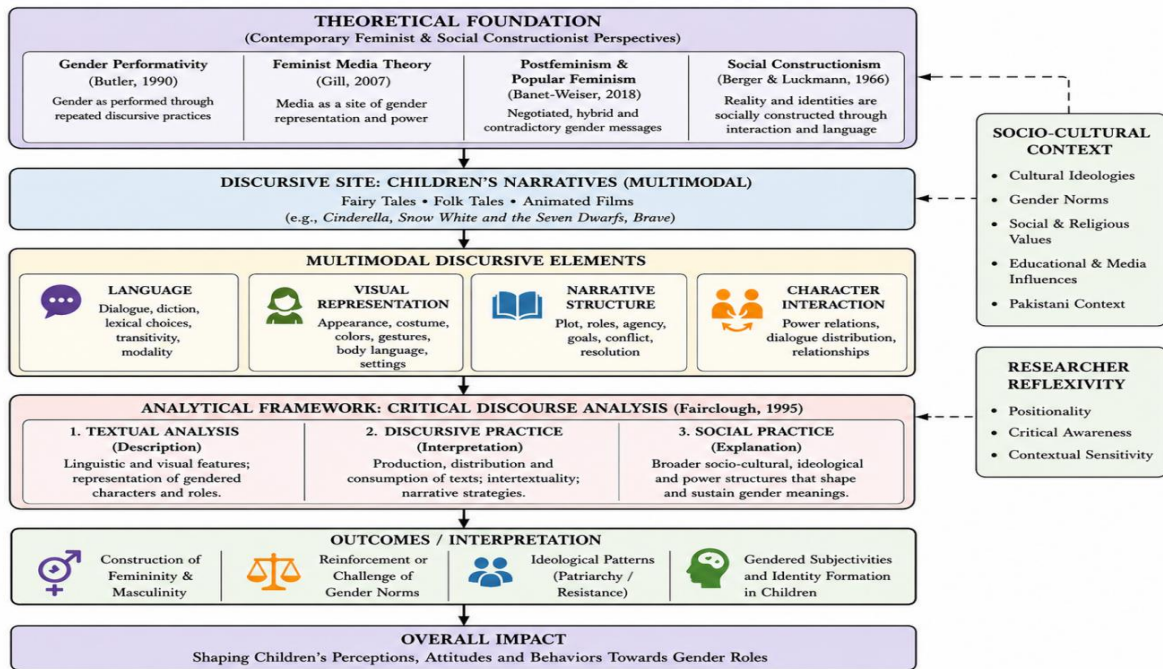
The strategies repeat an argument, namely that children's animated films can be used as a means of reinforcing gender expectations and can become part of the construction of gender norms as they encourage certain notions of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' as desirable and appropriate. For instance, the social constructionist approaches (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) are in favor of such a notion, suggesting an understanding of social construction through externalization, objectivation, and internalization processes. From this prism, women's images are read as reality and consumed by readers, with children being the

most vulnerable ones, as part of their identity. The theoretical perspective is that children's animated films are considered multimodal discursive texts where children's gender is performed through the discursive means of language, visual imagery, positioning, and narration.

These repeated performances have a significant role in the establishment of gender subjectivities, either reifying or challenging cultural ideologies. From an analytical point of view, the study applies a systematic approach to these processes, which is based on a three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis developed by Norman Fairclough (1995). The first dimension is textual analysis, focusing on language and visual aspects like vocabulary, agency, and characterization; the discursive representation of gender. The second dimension is discursive practice, examining the process of making narratives and how they are interpreted, thereby revealing the process of the production of a series of gender performances in cultural texts. Social practice is the third dimension, which brings the above representations into their social, cultural, and ideological frameworks and interprets how the performances perpetuate or challenge gender norms and power dynamics.

This holistic approach allows for the nature of the gender relationship in children's stories, as well as the more important, how the gender relationship is created in, normalized by, and can change children's gender identity over time, to be examined in this study. The study employs the current gender feminist theories and utilizes them as discourse analysis tools for CDA (Contemporary Discourse Analysis) in order to create a more sophisticated and contemporary understanding of the creation, circulation, and contestation of gendered meanings in children's animated films. This interplay allows a critical discourse analysis and a deeper understanding of socio-cultural processes of representing genders.

Figure No. 1. Theoretical Framework



### Research Methodology

This paper is based on a qualitative research design, using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and a three-dimensional model provided by Norman Fairclough (1995). This approach involves a view of discourse as a social practice, as a way of constructing and reproducing meaning, identity, and power relationships that are not simply the language that is used, but a way of using the language. The theoretical framework of the study is closely related to the methodology design, so that it is possible to analyze the role of gender roles in discursively creating the animated stories of children systematically.

The data for this research was obtained from three popular animated versions of fairy tales: *Brave*, *Cinderella*, and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. The choice of these films was based on purposive selection as they have a cultural meaning, global coverage, and are contrasting in the depiction of femininity and masculinity. Each movie was viewed multiple times, with a total of 6-8 hours of interaction per movie to build a deep familiarity with the narrative form and discursive patterns. Each movie was subjected to several viewings and then divided into individual scenes based on a change in location, interaction of

characters, and development of the storyline. About eighty to one hundred different scenes were included on average in each film.

Based on this larger dataset, 18 scenes (six scenes per movie) were picked in order to analyze them in detail. The purposive sampling method was followed as it was based on the research questions and theory. Usages of gender roles were explicitly or implicitly expressed in dialogue, character interaction, and/or visually. Special consideration was paid to the scenes representing the submissiveness of women, their resistance, dominance of men, courage, or the process of negotiating power relations. However, any scene that was solely transitional, decorative, or outside the discussion of gender was omitted. This kind of sampling ensured that the data gathered was not random or descriptive data but theoretical and methodological data.

These units of analysis in this study are dialogues, interactions of characters, visual representations, and narrative roles. Gender is discussed about the main characters like Merida from *Brave*, *Cinderella*, and *Snow White*, as they are young female characters in the story, and their role in the story. The male figures are examined with respect to their reinforcement or subversion of the

hegemonic notion of male identity, specifically princes and authoritative figures. Other characters, including stepmothers and parental figures, are also considered as they contribute to the reproduction of the ideological control and the normative expectation as well. The analysis of gender identities being negotiated and constructed in the narrative is captured by placing characters in these relational and discursive contexts. The data collection was based on transcription of the conversations in the selected scenes and logical recording of the images of important moments in the interaction, pauses, or symbolism. Field notes were made both during the viewing process and to record first observations, common patterns, and new analytical observations. The combination of

text and images suggests the multimodality of discourse in animated films.

Tables No. 1, 2, 3, and 4 are interrelated and present a coherent picture of the purposive selection of characters from selected movies to make them culturally accepted. The initial selection of scenes, dialogues, and words was based on the latent content analysis, which led to a deeper understanding of the construction of imagery and representation of gender among the child viewers. Initial coding allows the researcher to dissect and unpack what is occurring in the "understory" of the storyline, namely the structure, symbolic content, and discursive and argumentative features.

**Table 1. Film Duration and analytical sample**

Film	Total Duration	Approx. Total Scenes	Scenes Selected	Selected Time Range	Focus of Selected Scenes
Brave	1 hour 33 minutes	95-100 scenes	6 scenes	00:05:00 - 01:25:00	Female agency, resistance to marriage, defiance of authority, and mother-daughter power dynamics.
Cinderella	1 hour 14 minutes	85-90 scenes	6 scenes	00:03:00 - 01:10:00	Female submissiveness, domestic labor, obedience, and transformation through external intervention.
Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs	1 hour 23 minutes	80-85 scenes	6 scenes	00:04:00 - 01:15:00	Passive femininity, nurturing roles, beauty ideals, and the male rescue narrative.

**Table 2. Selected scenes from Cinderella**

Film	Scene No.	Scene Description	Primary Discursive Focus
Cinderella	1	Cleaning and household chores.	Domestic labor and silence.
Cinderella	2	Interaction with stepmother.	Power and control.
Cinderella	3	"Have courage and be kind" sequence.	Passive virtue and obedience.
Cinderella	4	Transformation scene (Fairy Godmother).	External rescue and intervention.
Cinderella	5	Ball interaction with the Prince.	Romantic dependency.
Cinderella	6	Marriage resolution.	Reward through marriage and domesticity.

**Table 3. Selected scenes from Snow White**

Film	Scene No.	Scene Description	Primary Discursive Focus
Snow White	1	Cleaning and organizing the dwarfs' house.	Domestic femininity and unpaid labor.
Snow White	2	Singing while nurturing forest animals.	Caregiving and nurturing roles.
Snow White	3	First interaction with the seven dwarfs.	Submissive politeness and domestic utility.
Snow White	4	Encounter with the Evil Queen (disguised).	Beauty as a source of value and threat.
Snow White	5	Eating the poisoned apple.	Female vulnerability and victimization.
Snow White	6	The Prince reviving Snow White with a kiss.	Male rescue narrative and passive resolution.

**Table 4. Selected scenes from Brave**

Film	Scene No.	Scene Description	Primary Discursive Focus
Brave	1	Merida riding and practicing archery.	Active femininity, physical agency.
Brave	2	Marriage discussion with parents.	Resistance vs. obedience.
Brave	3	Archery contest ("I'll be shooting for my own hand").	Defiance of gender norms.
Brave	4	Conflict with mother.	Power negotiation.
Brave	5	Journey and independence.	Self-determination.
Brave	6	Resolution and reconciliation.	Redefinition of femininity.

The processes of initial coding led by latent content analysis lead to a more comprehensive and nuanced coding process to unpack the discursive positioning of characters, choice of gendered linguistics, and the picturization of the scenes. At this stage, latent content systemically transformed into critical discourse analysis combined with a feminist theoretical approach with linguistic elements (lexical choices, modality, and transitivity) and visual and narrative (body language, positioning of characters, and assigning roles). Agency (who is acting and who is being acted upon) and the distribution of voice and

silence in interactions were emphasized. These coded elements were then linked to larger themes, in an iterative process of submissiveness and resistance of the feminine, man's dominance and preservation or rejection of gender norms. The themes were not predetermined but were developed inductively out of the data, and remained anchored on the theoretical framework of the study. The raw textual and visual data are systematically translated to discursive categories in table no. 5 and the coding of themes and ideological interpretations in different layers of CDA for transparency and analytical rigor.

**Table 5. Discursive Process of Coding Unpacking the Gendered Identities of Reinforcement & Resistance**

Discursive Feature Identified	Code	Category	Emerging Theme	CDA Level	Interpretation (Ideological Meaning)
Assertion of agency through dialogue	Female Agency	Resistance	Challenging Gender Norms	Textual	Language constructs femininity as active and self-determined.
Moral instruction emphasizing passivity	Passive Virtue	Obedience	Reinforcement of Femininity	Textual	Femininity linked with patience and compliance.
Action without verbal assertion	Silent Labor	Domestic Role	Feminine Submissiveness	Textual	Silence normalizes unpaid domestic labor.
Repetition of gendered vocabulary	Lexical Patterning	Gendered Language	Discursive Reinforcement	Discursive Practice	Repetition stabilizes gender roles as "natural."
Body posture and mobility	Active Body Representation	Physical Agency	Alternative Femininity	Textual	Visuals disrupt traditional princess image.
Body language indicating submission	Passive Body Positioning	Subordination	Gender Hierarchy	Textual	Visual framing reinforces power imbalance.
Action ownership (transitivity)	Male Agency	Dominance	Masculine Heroism	Discursive Practice	Men positioned as decision-makers and saviors.
Absence of voice	Silencing	Marginalization	Gendered Power Control	Discursive Practice	Silence reflects lack of power and autonomy.
Patterns of obedience vs resistance	Role Allocation	Gender Roles	Binary Gender Construction	Discursive Practice	Narratives construct fixed gender binaries.
Contrast between active vs passive femininity	Oppositional Representation	Ideological Conflict	Negotiation of Gender Norms	Social Practice	Media becomes site of contestation.
Traditional vs modern gender discourse	Ideological Framing	Cultural Norms	Transformation of Gender Ideology	Social Practice	Shift from passive to performative femininity.
Repetition of gender roles	Performativity	Social Construction	Naturalization of Gender	Social Practice	Gender appears "natural" through repetition.

The analytical process was based on the three-dimensional model of CDA by Fairclough. For the

textual analysis level, analysis of the linguistic and visual aspects was carried out to evaluate the level

of gender representation in some scenes. At the discursive practice level, it spoke about the production and interpretation of these representations at the story level, as well as repetition, intertextuality, and the circulation of gendered representations. At the social practice level, the discursive patterns were commented in general socio-cultural and ideational contexts, in the context of conventions and gender expectations in patriarchy.

The paper, therefore, related the micro-level characteristics of the text to the macro-level social systems, showing how the media discourse is the outcome of the gender conceptualizations in culture. The findings provided a solid ground through the application of the purposive sampling approach and a structured coding scheme with a multi-layered analytical methodology.

### Analysis

#### Instructing children: The discursive reinforcement and subversive resistance

The analysis is structured thematically as a way of following a systematic approach in the examination of how gender is discursively constructed in the selected films. These



The imperative form of the sentence gives emphasis to the order of authority and to the submissive role that is given to Cinderella. A similar ideology of passive hope is fostered by Cinderella's own words, "a dream is a wish your heart makes" (Cinderella, 1950), in that it isn't enough to simply believe it will happen; one must

preliminary thematic understandings that result in critical discourse analysis (CDA) come from Norman Fairclough. This thematic organization allows the identification of macro-level patterns and the micro-level linguistic features, and demonstrates how discourse operates to either reproduce, negotiate, or challenge gender ideologies.

The analysis of the selected scenes of Brave, Cinderella, Snow White, and the Seven Dwarfs demonstrates how discursively the gender roles are created, reproduced, and, in some cases, challenged through the use of language, story construction, and the visual images. The research was carried out in the context of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which is more than just describing a phenomenon but also analyzing the influence of the phenomenon in reproducing and disrupting the dominant gender ideology. Themes of female submissiveness, domesticity, romantic dependence, and male authority are repeated in the works by Cinderella and Snow White. For instance, the ability of the unpaid household chores to be considered "a woman's job" is illustrated by a line in Cinderella, "You have more work to do" (Lady Tremaine, Cinderella, 1950).



take some action to make it happen. Consideration or idealization of the problem of domesticity is also seen in Snow White and the Seven Dwarves. "Whistle while you work" (Snow White, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, 1937) portrays work as a free and fun activity, and disguises the gendered expectation to be at home.

The overarching theme of love's redemption (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, 1937) forms the woman's identity as the one whom a man saves. Conversational analysis focuses on the micro level of the performance of power relations in terms of linguistic options, that is, imperatives, declaratives, and emotional tone. The dominant

one in the Cinderella story, Lady Tremaine, does not talk about negotiation, reciprocity, or anything else. Other discursive features of femininity, and of another symptom with respect to the reactions to Cinderella's lack of resistance, are silence and complacency.



The following table (Table 6) shows how a critical discourse analysis reveals the meanings of genders within the everyday scenes, dialogue, and songs of Cinderella and Snow White. It demonstrates the relationship between language (imperatives, no response, and passive statements) and themes of

domesticity, obedience, and romantic dependence. On the micro level, these elements influence the behavior of the characters; on the macro level, they perpetuate norms of the ideology that naturalize the subordination and passivity of female characters.

**Table 6. Discursive Analysis of Gender and Childhood Construction**

Scene & Character	Discursive/Narrative Action	Core Theme	Linguistic/Micro-Level Element	Ideological Reinforcement (Macro-Level)
Cinderella (Domestic Scene)	Silent cleaning; no dialogue	Domesticity & Labor	Absence of speech; lowered gaze	Naturalizes unpaid household chores as a "feminine duty" and erases female agency.
Cinderella (Stepmother)	"You have more work to do"	Linguistic Domination	Imperative form; lack of negotiation	Establishes a rigid hierarchy of authority and internalized subordination.
Cinderella (Moral Line)	"Have courage and be kind"	Passive Femininity	Moral framing; emotive tone	Constructs femininity as tolerant and persevering rather than active or resistant.
Cinderella (Dream Song)	"A dream is a wish your heart makes"	Passive Hope	Declarative of desire vs. action	Supports an ideology where fulfillment is

				imagined rather than actively achieved.
Snow White (Cleaning Scene)	"Whistle while you work"	Romanticized Labor	Playful tone; musical accompaniment	Conceals gendered domestic expectations by presenting labor as a joyful, free activity.
Snow White (Dwarfs)	Polite and deferential speech	Gender Hierarchy	Deferential language; submissiveness	Normalizes the female role as a polite subordinate within a male-dominated space.
Snow White (Poison Apple)	Trusting behavior; naivety	Vulnerability	Behavioral naivety; silence	Constructs female identity as inherently vulnerable and in need of external protection.
Snow White (Romance)	"Someday my prince will come"	Romantic Dependence	Future-oriented passive declarative	Naturalizes dependency and heteronormative ideals of "rescue" as final happiness.

### 1. Male dominance and Gendered Stratification

This theme emphasizes the discursively produced male dominance and female characters' subordinate roles in the narratives, which contribute to hierarchy in the gendered narration. Cinderella (1950) and Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937) are no exception; in these films, masculinity is linked to action, rescue, and decision-making, while femininity is linked to silence, patience, and dependence. This is in line with Butler's (1990) idea of gender performativity,

which is a "repetitive performance of male superiority and female inferiority" that normalizes gender hierarchy.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) views these representations as ideological, with the rhetorical function of both reproducing and legitimizing unequal power relations (Lazar, 2007; Fairclough, 1995). The concept of female fulfilment and dependency is entrenched in normalized cultural expressions with linguistic elements like "someday my prince will come".



In Brave (2012), another character, Merida, defies the norm of gender, but the rest of the world is still

very much male-dominated, especially the institution of marriage. This is in line with Berger

and Luckmann's (1966) idea of the social construction of reality, which means that society's norms remain prevalent even when individuals are against them. Media analysis in Pakistan also sheds

light on the reinforcement of patriarchal values that frame women within limited roles and give dominance to masculinity and male authority (Zia, 2009; Shaheed, 2010).



Table 7 below shows that male characters are invariably represented as active agents, decision makers, and possessors of institutional power, while female characters are passive, obedient, and

dependent. The table clearly shows that the different actions in the film, linguistic patterns, and the themes that they suggest strengthen gender stratification across the films.

**Table 7. Narrative Resolution and the Construction of Masculine Authority**

Film & Scene	Narrative Action	Masculine Construct	Feminine Construct	Linguistic/Thematic Implication	Societal Reinforcement
Snow White (Revival)	Prince rescues Snow White via the kiss	Active Agent: Heroism and physical intervention	Passive Object: Silence, unconsciousness, and passivity	"Someday my prince will come"	Normalizes the idea that female salvation is a male-centered action.
Cinderella (The Search)	Prince/Grand Duke "chooses" the bride	Decision Maker: Holds the power of selection	Chosen Subject: Waiting for external validation	Lack of negotiation or agency in the "choice"	Reinforces the male position as the holder of institutional power.
Cinderella (Stepmother)	Enforced commands and locked rooms	Hierarchical Control: Enforcing authority	Obedience: Submission to domestic control	Commands without dialogue	Establishes patriarchal control as an unavoidable social structure.
Brave (Marriage Plot)	Expectations of a suitor/arranged marriage	Social Authority: Traditional structure of the "King"	Resistance vs. Norms: Merida fights the structure	Struggle against the marriage mandate	Even when resisted, the social structure remains centered on male-defined lineage.

In these films, the discourse is also the reinforcement of male superiority, since the film always presents women as objects and men as the subjects. Gender hierarchy occurs through recurring narratives and linguistic features that naturalize it, even in places where there might be resistance

## 2. Asserting Female Agency through Resistance: Redefining Gender Roles

The theme is that *Brave* subverts traditional gender hierarchies and builds female agency via resistance, femininity is no longer passive but an active self-determination. As opposed to the

previous stories, *Brave* (2012) offers a radical challenge to the gender discourse as it upsets the traditional patriarchal viewpoint by emphasizing Merida as a resistance hero outside the Patriarchal norm. Her refusal is not only made in action, but also in words: 'I'll be shooting for my own hand!' 'I want my freedom!' is an all first-person imperative, which is a clear and articulate statement of autonomy. This aligns with Butler's (1990) ideas on gender performativity, in which genders are not stable, but are rather constructed as a result of repeated acts of resistance that are performed against the dominant norms.



The speech and actions of Merida are used as counter-discourse from a Critical Discourse Analysis point of view, which disrupts the process of ideological reproduction of gender inequality (Fairclough, 1995; Lazar, 2007). This contrasts with previous expressions of feminine passivity (silence and obedience) with feminine activity (choice and agency), in the use of 'I' and the use of future tenses. This resistance can also be explained by the social construction theory of Berger and Luckmann (1966), which states that dominant realities are established through repetition and can be challenged through alternative actions and meanings. Yet, Merida's resistance to these norms

indicates that there are limits to resistance, as the major patriarchy framework remains unchanged even though its norms are contested. In Pakistan, too, there are parallels; in media discourse, women's resistance might be coexisting with continued cultural restrictions (Zia, 2009; Roomi & Harrison, 2010).

Merida's actions and speech are consistently autonomous, resistant, and assertive at both micro (linguistic) and macro (ideological) levels, as shown in Table 8 below. The table shows that her defiance of silence, of desire, of spaces traditionally considered masculine is illustrated.

**Table 8. Discursive Analysis of Subversive Resistance in *Brave***

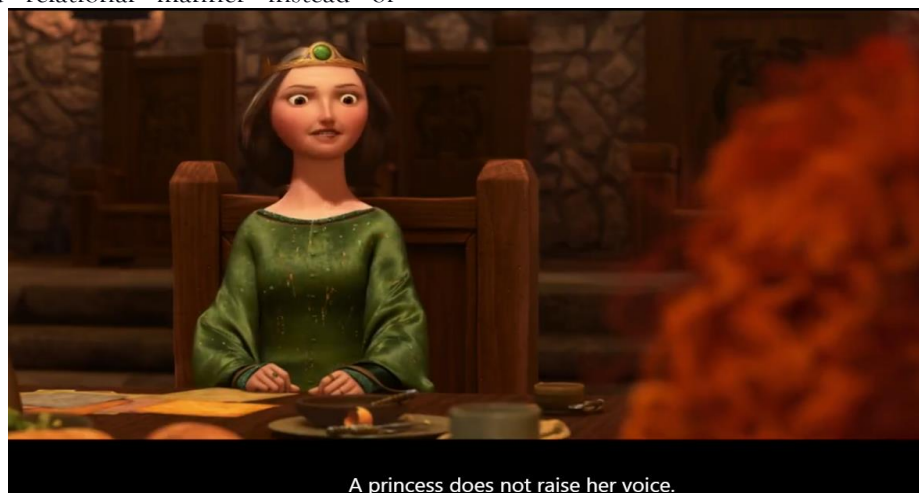
Scene & Character	Discursive/Narrative Action	Core Theme	Linguistic/Micro-Level Element	Ideological Disruption (Macro-Level)
Brave (Archery Scene)	"I'll be shooting for my own hand!"	Female Autonomy	First-person pronoun ("I"); future-oriented declarative	Outright dismisses arranged marriage; transitions from passive to active femininity.
Brave (Conflict)	"I want my freedom!"	Assertion of Desire	Explicit expression of want; direct speech	Challenges normative expectations by prioritizing self-determination over duty.
Brave (Mother-Daughter)	Argument/Contestation	Resistance	Raised voices; overlapping speech	Rejects the "normalization of silence"; establishes the right to contest authority.
Brave (Visual Action)	Competing in the games	Physical Agency	Visual mastery of "masculine" skill	Reclaims the public square as a space for female participation and excellence.

Through language and action, Merida challenges gender norms and builds her agency through resistance, thus challenging the concept of femininity in *Brave*. But the discourse does not completely undermine the patriarchal structure, suggesting that gender change is partial, rather than complete and undeniable.

### 3. Negotiating Gendered Power Relations: Ideological Conflict within Cultural Context

This theme emphasizes the significant role of the female authority figure in reinforcing patriarchal norms, but asserts that resistance works in a negotiated and relational manner instead of

oppositional. It is found that authority is not just inflicted by the male characters but also internalized and reproduced by the female characters. Queen Elinor says, "A princess does not raise her voice," thus normalizing the idea of patriarchy. This is similar to Butler's (1990) idea of performativity, which holds that gender norms are reinforced through frequent social practices and are enforced by women. From a CDA perspective, such discourse confirms ideology, as it ensures these expectations are natural and unquestionable, which are taken for granted (Fairclough, 1995; Lazar, 2007).



Meanwhile, Merida and her mother's relationship exemplifies traditionalism versus independence. Merida is, however, a resistant yet negotiated character; she is not opposed to the cultural structures, but modifies how she participates in them. This is in line with Berger and Luckmann's (1966) perspective on the construction and reconstruction of social reality via continuous

interaction. This is similar to the Pakistani context in which fighting patriarchy can be relational, slow, and gradual. Research indicates that women are often the ones who operate within and regulate prevailing orders, as well as older women who enforce traditional norms (Zia, 2009; Roomi & Harrison, 2010).



As shown in Table 9 below, the discourse reflects both the reproduction of patriarchy in the exercise of female authority and the negotiated resistance.

The table shows how the language and the actions of the narrative create a dynamic relationship of control, conflict, and transformation (CTT).

**Table 9. Negotiation of Gender Norms and Ideological Conflict**

Scene & Character	Discursive/Narrative Action	Core Theme	Linguistic/Micro-Level Element	Ideological/Cultural Parallel (Pakistan Context)
Brave (Queen Elinor's Rebuke)	"A princess does not raise her voice."	Internalized Patriarchy	Declarative; Normative imperative	Reflects how female authority figures (mothers/mothers-in-law) often act as enforcers of tradition.
Brave (Mother-Daughter Argument)	Clashing discourses of tradition vs. autonomy	Ideological Conflict	Overlapping speech; high emotional tone	Mirrors the domestic "background of conflict" where gender expectations are enforced by women.
Brave (Merida's Negotiation)	Redefining her role within the family/culture	Relational Resistance	Negotiated dialogue (Persuasion vs. Rebellion)	Parallels the "nuanced resistance" in Pakistan, where change occurs through slow transformation rather than direct challenge.
Brave (Final Reconciliation)	Changing structures from within	Cultural Evolution	Collaborative tone; shared agency	Represents the possibility of transforming patriarchal orders via internal

negotiation and mutual understanding.

The discourse proves that the reproduction and contestation of patriarchy occur within the framework of female actors, in their resistance being negotiated. This is an ongoing transformation of gender norms, a process in which these norms can be contested but also redefined from within the already established social structures.

**4. Shifting Gendered Notions: From Passive to Performative Femininity**

This theme suggests that the animated film is a discursive space in which the portrayal of

femininity moves from the passive reliance of Cinderella (1950) and Snow White (1937) to an agentive and performative femininity in Brave (2012) and a negotiation of gender norms. In the earlier films, the woman is passive, silent, and dependent on a romantic man, but in Brave, it is a woman who is independent, resisting, and expressing herself. This change is parallel to Butler's (1990) notion of performativity, that gender identities are not static; instead, they are constantly produced by repeated acts and discourses.



From a CDA point of view, these films serve as propagators and debunkers of dominant gender norms (Fairclough, 1995; Lazar, 2007). Despite its alternative discourse, Brave does not destroy

traditional expectations; it is a negotiable change in the context of traditional culture. This reflects the opinion of Berger and Luckmann (1966) that

social realities are built and can be changed over time.

Gender socialization is one of the important aspects of these representations from the sociological perspective due to its influence on the understanding of appropriate roles and identities, especially for children. Such changes can be seen in the Pakistani context, where there are

traditional gender norms alongside new forms of female agency (Zia, 2009; Shaheed, 2010).

The difference between passive femininity and performative femininity can be seen in different aspects of the narrative, language, and ideology, as shown in Table 10 below. The table shows the shift from reinforcing traditional roles to more active and self-articulated female subjectivities in the course of discourse.

**Table 10. The Transformation of Gender Ideology in Animated Discourse**

Feature	Passive/Traditional Femininity (Snow White/Cinderella)	Performative/Agentic Femininity (Brave)	Discursive/Sociological Impact
Narrative Agency	Inaction & Waiting: Resolution depends entirely on external male intervention.	Defiance & Assertion: Resolution is driven by the female lead's choices.	Shifts the "proper role" of children from passive observers to active participants.
Linguistic Model	Silence & Deference: Use of politeness markers and internalized moral silence.	Direct Speech & Resistance: Use of "I" declaratives and "negotiated" dialogue.	Replaces "internalized virtue" with "self-articulating subjectivity."
Domestic Discourse	Romanticized Submissiveness: Labor is framed as a joyful, natural duty.	Negotiated Tradition: Cultural expectations are acknowledged but contested.	Disrupts the naturalization of unpaid labor as an inherent feminine trait.
Macro-Level Goal	Affirmation: Reaffirming past gender roles and heteronormative dependence.	Transformation: Challenging and reimagining existing ideological frameworks.	Media discourse acts as a site for "active construction" of gendered subjectivities.

The films in the discourse that have been discussed here show a transformation from passive to performative femininity: not all the traditional gender norms are eliminated, but rather they are negotiated. This further reflects media as a strong arena to strengthen and reshape gender perspectives.

### Discussion

The aim of this study is to explore the construction and representation of gender identity in children's narratives, both in terms of the language and the visual representation of the narratives, as well as their structure. The results of the study indicate

that media texts do not have a neutral space, but rather are active spaces that produce ideologies, in which the construction of gender is ongoing, reproduced, and at times also challenged. This presents a sociological issue, is the gender in such texts a reflection of society or a means of reproducing society itself?

One interesting discovery is that of the influence language has on gender identities. Lexical distinctions are made for female characters, who have an emphasis on beauty, gentleness, and submission, and for male characters, who have an emphasis on strength, action, and bravery. Though this is similar to previous research (Zipes,

2011; Shaheen et al., 2019; Ullah & Skelton, 2013), language is not just reproducing gender, it is also creating gender. The concept of performativity is important here as the repetition of language patterns is performative and is what constitutes “gender over time” (Butler, 1990/2006). This indicates that gender is more towards a “performance” than a fixed state. This does raise issues with social constructionism, however, as it is socially constructed, what is the extent to which people have agency to defy the constructions? The results suggest that repetition creates an effect of naturalization of gender norms that leads to limited resistance.

Male characters are usually active and are in positions of making decisions, whereas female characters are more passive and/or reactive. From the sociological point of view, it is an indication of the wider power dynamics, and fits Butler's theory of the sedimentation of repeated actions into what can be seen as a naturalized gender hierarchy (1993). However, at the same time, there is an urgent discussion to be had: is agency gendered or is it discursively attributed, through narrative conventions? Empirical research in Pakistan (Ullah & Skelton, 2013; Ali et al., 2021) points to the fact that these representations are not only inculcated in culture but also in institutional practices, so that the narratives are not separate and distinct but are a part of a broader system of gender socialization.

Having visuals also helps to consolidate gender norms. Beauty and delicacy are the attributes of the female character, and strength and action are the attributes of the male character. The objectification of women and the activation of men are the interpretations of feminist media theory on it. As per feminist media theory, it's an objectification of women and activation of men. (Gill, 2007; Rahman & Jackson, 2020). Butler's model, however, extends this idea to the notion that the visual markers are not representations but are repeatedly stylized, thus creating the appearance of a stable gender identity. This is an important question because gender is a product of the body, and can deviations from the body make a difference to dominant norms? While current accounts provide some evidence for some change towards the active presence of women (Zhou et al.,

2022), these changes are limited to a dominant, visual, and ideational space, indicating that there is only partial resistance.

Another example of the persistence of gender hierarchy is the narrative roles. Male characters represent the main protagonists in the center, female characters are placed as caring, victims, or supporting characters. Post-feminist views suggest that depictions of ‘empowered’ women might generate ‘equal’ but fail to resolve inequalities in structures (Banet-Weiser, 2018). From a Butler's perspective, such shifts could be thought of as reconfigurations and not disruptions of gender norms, in that the performance is changed, but the gender norm remains. This indicates that gender ideology is a dynamic and not fixed, but constantly changing in order to maintain its rule.

Voice and dialogue distribution are another way of demonstrating the power imbalance between men and women. Men are given authority and even a voice, while women are sidelined or denied a voice, or allowed to speak in a passive, emotional way. The sociological aspect is that this is the case of unequal access to symbolic power, which is the power to establish reality by means of speech. However, Butler's concept of ‘performativity’ may help to account for the fact that such patterns of speaking and silencing can be repeated, and that these inequalities seem to occur naturally. This is in line with the worldly and Pakistani studies (Shaheen et al., 2019; Rahman & Jackson, 2020), which support the notion of discourse as a place for power.

The results presented in this study show how the global influence of media works together with local women's and men's norms in the Pakistani socio-cultural setup. Though the stories are from various cultures, their intake in Pakistan helps in reinforcing gender expectations. This is in keeping with the social constructionist perspective that the media is a key player in the construction of social reality. Meanwhile, Butler's theoretical position has it that the repeated presentation of these norms may result in their internalization and enactment, conditioning them to become part of the routines of everyday life. This is a much wider sociological question: how well the global media reflects gender norms or how well it adapts to the local culture.

This study demonstrates that gender in children's narratives is not only represented, but it is also produced, an action that is based on language, pictures, and narrative structures. The analysis, based on Butler's theory of performativity, social constructionism, and feminist media theory, transcends description and explores the way in which gender norms are reproduced and negotiated. Most importantly, it is a contribution to the meager human society studies literature in the Pakistani context, and at the same time, it is concerned with the general sociological issues of power, discourse, and identity. The results finally indicate that children's stories are 'not innocent' forms of entertainment, but are important cultural resources in the continuous process of creating gendered social reality.

### **Conclusion**

This paper aimed to discuss the construction of gendered childhood in the discourse of children's stories through the lens of a critical discourse analytic approach, which was developed through the prism of a feminist approach. The results show that gender is not only being represented but also being constructed in discursive practices, which are embedded in language, images, and plots. All these factors help to normalize some of the concepts of masculinity and femininity, and allow for the expectation of children engaging with concepts of identity formation at a young age. The analysis of the way discourse operates reveals that gendered meanings are reproduced in terms of the repetitive representation of things, such as the allocation of agency, voice, and moralization of narratives. In some texts, there are changes, notably in relation to female agency, but in most cases, these modifications are confined to the overarching context; in this, traditional gender norms remain prominent. It highlights the multiple and multidimensional nature of the interpretation of modern discourse on gender, and that there are oppositions and supports.

The study has an insert value in the scanty literature published in Pakistan on the topic of gender representation in children's media. It introduces the global discourse in the local socio-cultural context and how discourse is related to the status quo in society, and how it may reinforce or

redefine the status quo in society implicitly. Reflexively, this discussion presents the importance of critically analyzing the media that children watch since such narratives are critical in the formation of early gender roles and gender identity. The current research contributes to the feminist critical discourse analysis by going beyond the superficial accounts of the gender representation and providing a more profound insight into the processes of the discourse formation and reproduction of gendered realities. It reminds us of the importance of appraising children's accounts as not neutral cultural products but as powerful locations of the structuring of the ideology. It therefore shows how socially constructed role learning in fairy tales is learnt by children without their knowledge, and also how the normative gender ideology is passed down from one generation to another.

### **Future Implications**

The results of this research guide present a number of alternatives for further research and practice. First, locally relevant research is required, which will be conducted amongst children in Pakistan on different media platforms, including television, online platforms, and social media. The extension of the analysis would provide a greater understanding of how a gendered discourse is constructed in different media contexts and for different audiences. Future research can include audience reception studies, which will explore children's interpretation and uptake of such representations of gender. From the results of this paper, it would be proposed that an active involvement in the learning process of young readers in the reading process and how they respond to these stories would give a clear indication of the whole process of gender socialization.

Other discipline-oriented analyses, such as critical discourse analysis and education, psychology, and media studies, might provide gendered analysis in the construction of childhood, adding to its complexity. The following techniques would assist in bridging the gap between reading and having to use the text to make meaning of it in the real world, especially in relation to understanding discourse in attitude, behavior, and identity. On a

more specific level, the study proposes that these content creators, educators, and policymakers need to be more critical of the children's media. It is important that encouraging stories defy limiting gender norms and offer a range of identity images as a way to establish more accepting forms of socialization. Finally, the paper underlines the need for more theoretical development of the feminist discourse analysis in non-Western societies. The foregrounding of the Pakistani vision will allow for future research to be a part of a more comprehensive study of worldly gender construction, negotiation, and struggle in discourse.

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