

HOW THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER ROLES AMONGST LITERARY TEXTS INFLUENCE OUR IDENTITY AND SENSE OF BELONGING

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‘The term gender role refers to society’s concept of how men and women are expected to look and behave.’ There are a plethora of ways that these roles and expectations are created: from social norms, the society/generation in which we live and surround ourselves with, and what we read, which is arguably the most influential. Ultimately, this is because reading impacts how our minds grow and develop – it’s how we learn to understand, communicate and how we begin to develop our sense of belonging. Many young girls growing up idolising fairy tales and princesses, subsequently meaning they go on to dream about their perfect wedding; feeling like a princess themselves, falling in love and marrying their ‘Prince Charming.’ Throughout *Sexuality, Gender and Nationalism*, Kate Houlden goes on to depict the ways several male writers use not only gender, but sexuality and race in Anglophone Caribbean literature as a form of ‘masculine assertion.’ Inevitably, these types of texts go on to set expectations of Caribbean men and women – thereupon meaning, when these individuals don’t align into these social norms, they often fall victim to the texts and lose their sense of belonging amongst the community they feel lost – often referred to and seen as black

sheep, which inevitably takes a toll on their mental wellbeing.

Kate Houlden’s *Sexuality, Gender and Nationalism in Caribbean Literature* adds to the vast range of growing studies focusing not only on gender and sexuality amongst Caribbean Literature, but also adds to an array of texts that highlight the way in which we as individuals feel the longing to belong amongst different times and societies.

There are many ways in which we as individuals feel the need to hold a sense of belonging, whether it is through either our sexuality, gender or race. Throughout the text Houlden touches on key features of the sense of longing and the need to belong amongst societies and be accepted into the social construct that is formed. These being: different cultures and gender and sexual identity.

Across the text, Houlden provides readers with extensive research on Anglophone Caribbean literature, in which she goes on to introduce her study and focus on ‘the intersection of masculinity studies, feminism and queer theory,’ through the themes of nationalism, black masculinity, or same-sex desire.

Following Houlden’s introduction to the text, the first three chapters go on to assess the work of Frantz Fanon – a West Indian psychoanalyst and social philosopher, who is known for confronting the complex formations of colonised psychic constructions of blackness in *Black Skin, White Mask*, that critiques the plethora of ways in which identity, particularly blackness, is constructed and produced on behalf of the national liberation of colonial people.

The following two passages then focus on the way in which Caribbean women and same-sex desire are featured throughout Anglophone

Caribbean literary texts, consequently going on to provide Houlden with a gateway to briefly discuss a plethora of male writers and their own works.

In her piece, Houlden argues that decolonisation tended to instantiate typical and traditional nuclear family configurations working for the newly independent nations. She then draws into an array of scholars, such as Leah Reade Rosenberg and Curdella Forbes and brings into focus the weight sexuality studies bear on Anglophone Caribbean literature and how they are often perceived as a foundation to the field. However, more often than not these texts are written by men – which ultimately brings into question the integrity of these texts, meaning if there isn't an equal weighing of male and female writers, there will inevitably be a bias towards the way one sex is conveyed.

Furthermore, Houlden then not only challenges the readers to question and examine these works, but also portrays them as decolonial nationalist texts. Out of the Caribbean literature she reviews and focuses on, she additionally explores the way in which many of the texts tell readers about the 'anxieties and fissures beneath performances of apparent masculine assertion.'

An example of how masculine assertion is used amongst literary texts is the argument that throughout history, literature has played a key role in reinforcing the barrier between men and women. Female protagonists are often portrayed as damsels in distress, seen as the subordinate sex who need to be saved by men. This limits them to their only purpose in life being to marry and bear children, hence, if they don't oblige and push against the current of societal norms, they are conveyed to be one of two things – either mentally ill or villainous. On the other hand, men are often presented to be heroic and are often strong, noble figures of authority.

These ideas are carved and engrained into our minds from a young age. As we learn and develop throughout our lives by reading nursery rhymes,

idolising fairy tales and observing older generations, all of these factors gradually condition the subconscious mind and the way we develop not only our gender identity, but also our sense of belonging. Due to the social constructs and expectations that we create, we inevitably form barriers around individuals who feel they don't live up to the criteria cast upon them.

Finally, Houlden analyses the works that she examines throughout the text, scoping into each writer's oeuvre so that we as readers are able to envision a trajectory of the lives that these writers live - not only in the Caribbean but amongst a variety of cultures and societies.