

## GENDERED READING GENDERED READERS: RESPONDING TO DRAMA FROM A GENDERED PERSPECTIVE

Collin Jerome  
Centre for Language Studies  
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak  
Tel: +6082-581729  
Fax: +0682-581781  
jcollin@cls.unimas.my  
www.cls.unimas.my

### **Abstract**

*From the ancient to contemporary times, drama has communicated and conveyed the messages as well as representations of gender and sexuality through the elements such as dialogue and characters. It has constantly (re)defined and (re)constructed the representations of gender and sexuality which has affected readers'/audience's awareness and understanding of their own gender and sexuality. Thus, this study explores readers' views on the representation of gender in drama, and how this representation reflects and affects their awareness and understanding of gender. This takes into account reading drama as a gendered act that engages readers to read from their gendered perspectives. In view of this, the study examines a) readers' views on the representation of characters as gendered beings in selected dramatic texts, b) the effects that this representation has on their awareness and understanding of their own gender, and c) the extent to which reading from a gendered perspective helps them better understand the characters as gendered beings. Questionnaires were distributed to 72 Unimas TESL and ESL undergraduates, followed by a series of interviews to elicit their views on the aspects that the study seeks to examine. The findings show that both male and female respondents invariably responded to the representation of gendered characters which subsequently influenced their understanding of gender in general and their own gender in particular. The findings also reveal the contrasts in their construction of gender identity which was influenced by the stereotyped and non-stereotyped beliefs about gender. Additionally, reading the dramatic texts from a gendered perspective had influenced their views on the characters' as gendered beings. It is hoped that the study will shed more insights into the effects that gender portrayals in literary texts have on adult readers' understanding of gender which takes into account reading literary texts from a gendered perspective. Hence the importance to instigate gender awareness and gender equity in the literature classroom.*

### **1.0 Introduction**

The representations of gender and sexuality are evidently abundant in literary forms and drama in particular communicates and conveys these representations through the elements such as dialogues and characters, implicating the extent to which these elements mirror the likeliness of the individuals and society at large. It can be said that drama as well as other literary forms have constantly (re)defined and (re)constructed the representations of gender and sexuality which have affected readers' understanding of their own gender and sexuality. This is evident through readers' invariable responses to the portrayal of and the language used to portray characters as gendered beings.

Studies on the representations or portrayals of gender in literary forms mainly explore

children's responses to the portrayal of characters through visual/pictorial depiction in children's literature, which specifically focus on stereotypical gender portrayals in traditional folktales and fairy tales (see Kortenhaus & Demarest, 1993; Weitzman, Eiffer, Hokada, & Ross, 1972)[1]. These studies not only reveal negative representation of female characters but also the effects it has on children, particularly on how stereotypical gender roles affect children's perception of themselves (Narahara, 1998)[2]. LaDow (1976, in Gooden 2001)[3] claimed that childhood was a stage where children developed their sex identity and the stereotypical gender portrayals through visual (e.g. pictorial) depiction of gendered characters may either positively or negatively affect their preconceived notions about their own gender.