

A Qualitative Content Analysis of Gender Representation in Aesop's Fables for Critical Language Education

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Abstract

Aesop's fables are widely used in language classrooms because their concise narratives and explicit morals support accessible reading and discussion. However, instructional stories also communicate social values, including gendered expectations. This study examines gender representation in purposively selected corpus of Aesop's fables through qualitative content analysis, with feminist critical discourse analysis (CDA) informing the interpretive framework. Ten fables containing explicitly gendered human roles were purposively selected from Townsend's translation of *Three Hundred Aesop's Fables* (1867/2004) to base the analysis on explicit linguistic evidence rather than inferred gender attribution to animal characters. The analysis focused on four dimensions: role positioning, action patterns, evaluative language, and moral framing. The findings reveal recurring gender patterns in narrative representation. In the selected corpus, male characters tend to appear associated with livelihood labor, evaluative or instructive roles, and publicly visible action or consequence, whereas female characters more often appear in domestic or caregiving contexts and are frequently positioned within cautionary narratives in which planning, ambition, or judgment is morally evaluated. These patterns emerge through narrative distributions of agency and responsibility as well as through moral conclusions that guide readers' interpretations of characters' actions. Rather than advocating the removal of traditional texts from language classrooms, the study argues that Aesop's fables can be productively taught through critical literacy approaches that encourage learners to examine how narratives represent identity, authority, and social responsibility.

Keywords: Aesop's fables, gender representation, critical literacy, qualitative content analysis, language education

Introduction

Aesop's fables, characterized by their concise narratives and explicit moral lessons, are widely used as reading materials in educational settings. Balla (2000) notes that such stories can stimulate children's interest in reading and literature. Because of these pedagogical features, fables are frequently incorporated into language-learning materials and are often presented as culturally neutral narratives conveying universal moral principles.

However, fables do more than communicate moral lessons. Stories also convey social expectations about behavior, responsibility, and authority. Research on narrative comprehension suggests that readers actively interpret characters' intentions, evaluate their actions, and derive broader meanings from narrative events rather than simply decoding literal content. Mar and Oatley (2008) argue that fictional narratives function as simulations of social experience in which readers interpret motives and consequences to construct meaning. From a discourse perspective, such interpretive processes can also reproduce broader social beliefs and power relations through recurring narrative patterns.

Feminist critical discourse analysis highlights how language and discourse may normalize gendered expectations by presenting particular roles or behaviors as natural or morally appropriate. Lazar (2007) explains that gender ideology and power relations are often reproduced through everyday discourse practices that subtly reinforce hierarchical gender relations. When such patterns appear in widely used classroom texts, they may influence how learners perceive gender roles even when gender is not the explicit topic of instruction.

Despite the popularity of Aesop's fables in education, systematic research on gender representation in these stories remains limited. One reason is that many well-known fables feature animal characters rather than human figures. Because animals often function symbolically, identifying gender roles in such narratives can become speculative or dependent on cultural assumptions. As Hall (2016) observes, many commonly circulated selections of Aesop's fables show little explicit attention to gender or sexuality, making direct gender analysis difficult. Consequently, attempts to interpret gender symbolism in animal characters may risk overinterpretation.

To address this methodological challenge, the present study focuses on fables that contain explicitly gendered human characters, such as widow, mother, wife, father, brother, or boy. Examining stories in which gender is clearly signaled through language allows the analysis to rely on direct textual evidence rather than symbolic inference. By focusing on these

narratives, the study explores how role positioning, actions, and moral evaluations contribute to representations of masculinity and femininity.

The study also considers the implications of these representations for language education. Contemporary literacy research emphasizes the importance of helping learners critically examine how texts construct meaning and social relationships. Hilary Janks (2010) argues that critical literacy encourages readers to question how power and identity are represented in texts and to consider alternative interpretations. Applying this perspective to traditional narratives allows teachers to use familiar stories not only for language practice but also for developing students' awareness of how discourse shapes social ideas.

Accordingly, this study investigates gender representation in a small corpus of Aesop's fables containing explicitly gender-marked human characters. Using qualitative content analysis, it examines how role positioning, action patterns, evaluative language, and moral framing construct masculinity and femininity in relation to authority, labor, caregiving, and responsibility. The study then considers how these findings may inform approaches to critical language education.

Based on the objectives described above, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How are male and female characters represented in selected Aesop's fables that contain explicitly gender-marked human roles?
2. What patterns of authority, labor, caregiving, and moral evaluation are associated with male and female characters in these fables?
3. How can the analysis of gender representation in these fables inform the use of traditional narratives in critical language education?

Literature Review

Gender, Discourse, and the Construction of Social Roles

Research in discourse studies has long emphasized that language not only reflects social realities but also participates in constructing them. From this perspective, texts and everyday communication can reproduce cultural expectations about identity, authority, and social roles. Feminist approaches to discourse analysis highlight how gender relations are maintained through language practices that present particular behaviors or social positions as natural or appropriate. According to Lazar (2007), feminist critical discourse analysis (CDA) examines how gendered power relations are produced, negotiated, and normalized through

everyday discourse practices. Through such processes, patterns of representation and evaluation in texts may contribute to shaping how gender roles are understood within particular social contexts.

Other scholars in language and gender studies similarly emphasize the role of discourse in shaping understandings of gender. Cameron (2006) discusses how language contributes to the construction and negotiation of gender identities in social interaction, while Mills (2008) notes that discourse frequently positions individuals within gendered expectations through patterns of description, evaluation, and representation. These patterns do not necessarily appear through explicit statements about gender; rather, they often emerge through repeated associations between gender identities and particular actions, responsibilities, or forms of agency.

Within educational contexts, such discourse patterns are particularly significant because classroom texts contribute to learners' understanding of social roles. Sunderland (2004) argues that gendered discourses circulate widely in educational materials, classroom interaction, and pedagogical practices, shaping how learners interpret gender identities and relationships. Examining gender representation in narrative texts used for teaching can therefore provide insight into how cultural expectations about masculinity and femininity are communicated through educational discourse.

Because these patterns often appear through repeated narrative roles, evaluative language, and moral judgments, qualitative analysis of textual patterns can provide a useful method for identifying how gender meanings are constructed in narrative discourse. From a broader critical discourse perspective, discourse can be understood as a form of social practice through which ideology is reproduced and normalized. Norman Fairclough (1995) argues that discourse both reflects and shapes social structures, while Teun A. van Dijk (2008) emphasizes that discourse contributes to the organization of social knowledge and group-based ideologies. These perspectives support the present study's focus on how recurring narrative patterns in fables may naturalize particular understandings of gender roles.

Gender Representation in Educational Texts

Research on language learning materials has consistently shown that gender representation in educational texts is often uneven. Early studies of English language teaching materials identified systematic gender bias in the visibility and portrayal of male and female characters. Porreca (1984), in one of the earliest analyses of ESL textbooks, found that male characters were significantly more visible than female characters and were often associated

with professional and active roles, while female characters were more commonly linked to domestic or supportive activities. These patterns suggested that language learning materials could reproduce traditional gender expectations through the narratives and examples presented to students.

Subsequent research has confirmed that gender representation remains an important issue in language education. Lee (2014), for example, examined gender representation in EFL textbooks and found that although female characters have become more visible in modern materials, stereotypical role patterns often persist in the types of occupations and activities associated with male and female characters. Such findings indicate that educational texts may continue to reflect cultural assumptions about gender even when educational policies emphasize equality.

More recent research has reached similar conclusions. Alqahtani (2024) analyzed English language textbooks used in Saudi Arabia and reported that, despite policy reforms promoting women's empowerment, traditional gender portrayals still appeared in narrative examples and visual representations. These patterns highlight the importance of critically examining the texts used in language classrooms. Because narrative texts are often presented as neutral examples for language practice, the gender roles embedded within them may be accepted by learners without reflection unless teachers actively encourage critical discussion.

Narrative Interpretation and the Educational Role of Stories

Research on narrative comprehension helps explain why stories can influence readers' perceptions of social roles and relationships. Narrative texts require readers to interpret characters' motivations, evaluate their actions, and infer broader meanings from story events. Bruner (1991) argues that narrative is a fundamental mode through which people organize experience and construct meaning, allowing individuals to understand social situations through story structures.

Similarly, Mar and Oatley (2008) propose that fictional narratives function as simulations of social experience in which readers mentally model characters' intentions, emotions, and the consequences of their actions. Through this interpretive process, readers engage in social reasoning that allows them to derive lessons or insights from narrative events. Because narrative comprehension involves interpreting characters' motivations and evaluating their behavior, stories used in educational contexts can influence how learners think about social roles and moral responsibility.

In literacy education, scholars have therefore emphasized the importance of teaching students not only to understand narrative content but also to critically examine how texts construct meaning. Janks (2010) argues that critical literacy encourages readers to analyze how power relations and social identities are represented in texts and to question the assumptions embedded in them. Applying critical literacy approaches to narrative texts allows teachers to use familiar stories as opportunities for reflection and discussion rather than simply as tools for teaching vocabulary or grammar. This focus on interpretation and evaluation is especially relevant to fables, where morals explicitly frame how readers should judge actions and characters.

Aesop's Fables as Moral Narratives

Aesop's fables have long been used in educational settings because of their concise narrative structure and explicit moral lessons. Originating in ancient storytelling traditions and transmitted through numerous translations and adaptations, these short narratives have become a lasting part of literary and educational culture. Their combination of simple plots and clear moral conclusions has made them particularly appealing for language teaching and moral instruction.

Scholars of folklore and classical literature note that the enduring popularity of Aesop's fables lies in their ability to illustrate general lessons about human behavior through memorable narrative examples. Gibbs (2002) observes that Aesop's fables have been widely adapted and retold across cultures, contributing to their long-standing presence in educational contexts. Because of their brevity and clarity, these stories are often used to introduce learners to narrative interpretation and moral reasoning.

Another notable feature of many Aesop's fables is the frequent use of animal characters to represent human qualities such as pride, greed, or cleverness. While this symbolic structure allows stories to convey moral lessons in a simplified way, it can also obscure the social identities of characters, including gender. Hall (2016) observes in a discussion of Aesopic traditions that many modern children's editions of the fables contain little explicit attention to gender roles. Because animal characters often represent generalized human behavior rather than specific social identities, identifying gender representation in such narratives can be difficult.

For this reason, analyses that attempt to interpret gender roles in Aesop's fables solely through animal symbolism may rely heavily on cultural assumptions rather than direct textual evidence. Focusing on fables that contain clearly identifiable human characters therefore

provides a more reliable basis for examining how gender roles are represented through narrative roles, actions, and moral evaluation.

Research Gap

Although previous research has examined gender representation in educational materials explored the interpretive role of narrative texts in learning, relatively little work has focused specifically on gender roles in Aesop's fables within the context of language education. In addition, many discussions of Aesopic narratives emphasize animal symbolism or general moral interpretation rather than examining how gender roles are constructed through narrative roles, actions, and evaluative language.

To address this gap, the present study examines a small corpus of Aesop's fables that contain gender-specific human roles such as widow, mother, wife, father, brother, and boy. By focusing on stories in which gender is clearly signaled through language, the analysis aims to provide a more textually grounded account of gender representation in these narratives. This approach also allows the findings to be connected more directly to discussions of critical literacy and inclusive language education.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs qualitative content analysis to examine patterns of gender representation in selected Aesop's fables. Qualitative content analysis is appropriate for investigating how meanings and social roles are constructed in texts because it supports the systematic identification and interpretation of recurring patterns of representation and evaluation (Schreier, 2012). The analysis focuses on textual representation rather than reader response, examining how gender roles are constructed within the narrative discourse of the fables themselves. In this study, the method is used to analyze how gender is represented through role positioning, action patterns, evaluative language, and moral framing in a small corpus of fables.

Data Source

The data were drawn from George Fyler Townsend's English translation of Three Hundred Aesop's Fables (Townsend, 1867/2004), accessed through Project Gutenberg. This collection was selected because it is a widely circulated public-domain translation and provides a stable textual source for examining gender representation as it appears in an English

version likely to circulate in educational contexts. Using a single translation also helps maintain consistency in lexical choice and narrative phrasing across the corpus.

Corpus Selection and Sampling Rationale

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select fables suitable for gender-focused analysis. As noted in previous scholarship, many widely circulated Aesop fables feature animal characters with limited or ambiguous gender marking, making gender analysis dependent on symbolic inference rather than explicit linguistic evidence (Hall, 2016). To reduce speculation, the present study focuses only on fables with linguistically marked male or female roles.

A fable was included if it met all three of the following criteria:

1. It contains explicit gender marking through human role labels such as widow, woman, wife, mother, father, boy, brother, or sister.
2. It contains an explicit or strongly implied moral evaluation, such as a stated moral or a clear judgment of behavior.
3. It includes social interaction or decision-making relevant to gendered social roles, such as authority, labor, caregiving, responsibility, credibility, or economic activity.

Ten fables were selected to allow for close qualitative reading of each text while still supporting cross-text comparison.

Table 1. Selected Gender-Explicit Aesop Fables Included in the Study

No.	Fable title (Townsend)	Explicit gender marker(s)	Primary social dimension(s) guiding selection
1	<i>The Widow and the Sheep</i>	widow	economic vulnerability, property relations, deception/credibility
2	<i>The Old Woman and the Wine-Jar</i>	old woman	desire/constraint, evaluation of longing, limitation and agency
3	<i>The Milk-Woman and Her Pail</i>	woman	economic planning, ambition, moral warning/evaluation
4	<i>The Woman and Her Hen</i>	woman	domestic labor, household economy, moral evaluation
5	<i>The Mother and the Wolf</i>	mother	caregiving, protection, fear/responsibility
6	<i>The Man and His Wife</i>	man, wife	household authority, decision-making, marital hierarchy
7	<i>The Monkeys and Their Mother</i>	mother	caregiving, responsibility/blame, moral evaluation

8	<i>The Fisherman and His Nets</i>	fisherman (male-coded occupational role in the story context)	labor, livelihood, economic value, public role
9	<i>The Thief and His Mother</i>	boy, mother	moral responsibility, parental influence, crime and punishment
10	<i>The Brother and the Sister</i>	brother, sister	family hierarchy, gender contrast, authority/evaluation

Note. Titles follow Townsend (1867/2004).

Analytical Framework and Theory-to-Code Connection

The coding framework was informed by feminist critical discourse analysis and narrative interpretation research. In this study, feminist CDA informed the interpretive lens used to understand patterns identified through qualitative content analysis rather than constituting the primary analytical method itself. Feminist CDA emphasizes how gender ideology and power relations are reproduced and normalized through discourse (Lazar, 2007; Mills, 2008). In this study, these concerns are examined through patterns of role positioning, action patterns, evaluative language, and moral framing. Narrative theory further highlights that stories guide interpretation by organizing experience into motives, actions, consequences, and meanings (Bruner, 1991). Given the moral structure of fables, the analysis also attends to how morals function as evaluative frames that position certain behaviors as desirable or blameworthy.

Based on these perspectives, four analytical dimensions were used:

- 1) Role positioning: how characters are positioned in relation to authority, dependence, responsibility, or leadership.
- 2) Action patterns: what characters do and where those actions occur (domestic sphere, work/economic sphere, public/social sphere).
- 3) Evaluative language: lexical and narrative cues that judge behavior (wise/foolish, careful/careless), including implied evaluation.
- 4) Moral framing: how the moral statement or narrative conclusion functions as a judgment that guides readers' interpretation of gendered behavior.

These dimensions were used consistently across all texts to ensure that claims in the findings section were grounded in observable narrative and linguistic evidence.

Coding Procedure

Coding was conducted in four stages. The coding unit consisted of short narrative segments or sentences that contained character actions, evaluative descriptions, or moral statements relevant to gender representation.

1. Familiarization: each fable was read multiple times to identify character roles, key actions, evaluative descriptions, and the moral structure.
2. Initial coding: fables were coded manually using a coding table containing (a) the excerpt, (b) assigned code(s), and (c) a short analytic memo explaining the coding decision.
3. Code refinement: category definitions were clarified when overlap occurred (e.g., distinguishing moral framing from evaluative language).
4. Cross-text comparison: coded excerpts were compared across the corpus to identify recurring patterns linking gender markers to authority, labor, caregiving, and moral evaluation.

A summary of coded excerpts and analytical interpretations is provided in Appendix A to illustrate how textual evidence informed the findings.

Reliability and Transparency in a Single-Researcher Study

Because the analysis was conducted primarily by a single researcher, several procedures were implemented to enhance the trustworthiness, credibility, and transparency of the study:

- 1) Clear coding definitions. Coding categories were defined through explicit operational descriptions to guide consistent interpretation (see Appendix A).
- 2) Intra-coder reliability check. After completing the initial coding of the corpus, five fables (50% of the dataset) were re-coded after a one-week interval using the same analytical framework to ensure consistency in category application.
- 3) Peer debriefing. To strengthen the credibility of the analysis, two colleagues with expertise in English language studies and qualitative analysis were invited to review the coding framework and a sample of coded excerpts. Their feedback indicated that the coding categories were clear, applicable, and consistently applied, with no major revisions recommended. Minor suggestions were considered in refining category descriptions and clarifying distinctions between analytical dimensions.
- 4) Audit trail. An audit trail was maintained throughout the study, including coding tables, category definitions, and analytic memos documenting coding decisions, revisions, and reflections during the analysis process.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the results of the qualitative content analysis of the ten selected fables listed in Table 1. The analysis examines how gender representation is constructed through role positioning, action patterns, evaluative language, and moral framing. Rather than treating findings and interpretation as separate stages, the section discusses the narrative patterns alongside their implications for gender representation and critical discourse analysis.

Across the selected corpus, recurring patterns appear in how male and female characters are positioned in relation to domestic life, labor, caregiving, judgment, and moral responsibility.

Role Positioning and Narrative Roles

One of the most visible patterns concerns the roles assigned to male and female characters within the narrative structure. Female characters in the corpus are often introduced in domestic, caregiving, or household-economic contexts. For example, in *The Widow and the Sheep*, the protagonist is described as “a certain poor widow” with “one solitary Sheep.” The detail that she shears the sheep herself “to avoid expense” situates the character within a household economy shaped by scarcity. Similarly, *The Woman and Her Hen* and *The Milk-Woman and Her Pail* both center on women managing small-scale productive resources such as poultry or milk.

Caregiving roles are also strongly associated with female characters. In *The Mother and the Wolf*, the mother speaks first to threaten and later to reassure the child, positioning her as the central figure responsible for the child’s safety and discipline. In *The Monkeys and Their Mother*, maternal care becomes the focus of the story, while in *The Thief and His Mother* the mother’s encouragement of early theft becomes part of the explanation for the son’s later punishment.

Male characters, by contrast, are more often positioned through work, judgment, or visible consequence. In *The Fisherman and His Nets*, the fisherman is defined primarily by his occupation and skill in managing his catch. In *The Man and His Wife*, the husband interprets his wife’s report and delivers the story’s final evaluative remark. Likewise, in *The Brother and the Sister*, the father acts as a moral instructor whose speech defines the lesson of the story.

From the perspective of feminist discourse analysis, such patterns illustrate how gender representation may emerge through the distribution of narrative roles rather than through explicit statements about gender (Lazar, 2007). The corpus tends to associate female characters with domestic or caregiving contexts and male characters with evaluation, labor, or

public consequence. These recurring patterns are consistent with broader discourse perspectives that view texts as sites where social meanings and ideologies are reproduced through repeated representation (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2008).

Gendered Action Patterns in Domestic Economy and Livelihood

The fables also show differences in the kinds of actions characters perform. Female characters are commonly linked to household production and domestic economic activity. In *The Woman and Her Hen*, the woman attempts to increase egg production by feeding the hen more barley. In *The Milk-Woman and Her Pail*, the farmer's daughter imagines a chain of profit from selling milk and raising chickens. In *The Widow and the Sheep*, the widow's attempt to shear the sheep herself reflects an effort to reduce household expenses. These examples illustrate how female action in the corpus frequently occurs within small-scale domestic economic systems.

Male characters, by contrast, appear more often in stories involving livelihood labor or publicly visible actions. The fisherman in *The Fisherman and His Nets* performs skilled occupational work, while the son in *The Thief and His Mother* becomes the central figure in a narrative of crime and public punishment.

These patterns do not imply that female characters lack agency. Rather, they suggest that agency is often represented in different domains of activity, with female action appearing more often in domestic settings and male action more often appearing in livelihood or socially visible contexts. From a feminist theoretical perspective, Butler (1990) further suggests that gender is not a fixed attribute, but a social construct produced through repeated discursive practices. This perspective reinforces the importance of examining how narrative texts may contribute to the ongoing construction of gender norms.

Evaluative Language and Moral Judgment

Another recurring pattern concerns how the stories evaluate characters' behavior. In several female-centered fables, narrative outcomes frame characters' actions through cautionary evaluation. In *The Milk-Woman and Her Pail*, the daughter's imagined plans collapse when the milk pail falls and "all her imaginary schemes perished in a moment." In *The Woman and Her Hen*, the attempt to increase productivity leads to the opposite outcome when the hen becomes "fat and sleek, and never once laid another egg."

Maternal figures are also subject to strong evaluative framing. In *The Monkeys and Their Mother*, excessive affection smothers one child, while neglect allows the other to survive. In *The Thief and His Mother*, the mother's failure to discipline the boy becomes part of the explanation for his eventual punishment.

A less cautionary example appears in *The Old Woman and the Wine-Jar*, where the female character is framed through sensory appreciation and memory rather than error or failed judgment. This suggests that not all female-centered evaluation in the corpus is corrective, even though cautionary framing remains more common overall.

A related evaluative pattern appears in *The Brother and the Sister*, where the father contrasts the son's beauty with the daughter's lack of beauty and instructs the daughter to "make up for" appearance through virtue. Here evaluation becomes explicitly gendered, linking feminine value to virtue while associating masculine value with conduct.

Male characters, by contrast, are more often evaluated through conduct, work, or interpretation of social behavior. In *The Man and His Wife*, the husband interprets the wife's experience and draws a broader conclusion about social perception. In *The Fisherman and His Nets*, the fisherman's activity highlights skill and practical limitation rather than moral failure.

Together, these evaluative patterns illustrate how narrative judgment attaches to different aspects of behavior for male and female characters.

Moral Framing and Gendered Lessons

The moral structure of the fables further reinforces these patterns. Several female-centered stories present moral lessons that warn against misjudgment or unintended consequences. For example, *The Widow and the Sheep* concludes that "The least outlay is not always the greatest gain," transforming the widow's attempt to save money into a cautionary lesson. Similarly, *The Woman and Her Hen* and *The Milk-Woman and Her Pail* frame attempts to increase productivity or plan for the future as examples of miscalculation.

Other stories connect maternal behavior to moral responsibility. In *The Monkeys and Their Mother*, the lesson that "The best intentions will not always ensure success" evaluates excessive affection. In *The Thief and His Mother*, the narrative links the son's punishment to the mother's early encouragement of theft.

Male-centered stories often frame morals through work, interpretation, or conduct. *The Fisherman and His Nets* emphasize the limits of skill and control in livelihood activity, while *The Man and His Wife* frames interpretation of small signs as evidence of broader social truth.

Together, these moral structures show how narrative evaluation and explicit morals contribute to the gendered interpretation of actions and responsibilities.

Table 2. Summary of Gender-Related Narrative Patterns in the Corpus

Narrative dimension	Female characters	Male characters	Representative fables
Role positioning	Frequently introduced in domestic, caregiving, or household-economic roles	Often positioned as workers, evaluators, moral speakers, or figures facing public consequence	<i>The Widow and the Sheep</i> ; <i>The Mother and the Wolf</i> ; <i>The Man and His Wife</i>
Action patterns	Household production, caregiving, and small-scale economic planning	Livelihood labor, public action, and visible consequence	<i>The Woman and Her Hen</i> ; <i>The Milk-Woman and Her Pail</i> ; <i>The Fisherman and His Nets</i>
Evaluative language	Actions often evaluated through cautionary outcomes, caregiving responsibility, or moral expectations	Behavior evaluated through conduct, work, or interpretive judgment	<i>The Monkeys and Their Mother</i> ; <i>The Old Woman and the Wine-Jar</i> ; <i>The Brother and the Sister</i>
Moral framing	Lessons often emphasize misjudgment, unintended consequences, or caregiving responsibility	Lessons often emphasize labor, interpretation, or conduct	<i>The Widow and the Sheep</i> ; <i>The Fisherman and His Nets</i> ; <i>The Thief and His Mother</i>

Conclusion

This study examined gender representation in a selected corpus of Aesop's fables through qualitative content analysis informed by feminist discourse perspectives and narrative theory. By focusing on fables containing explicitly gender-marked human characters, the analysis provided a textually grounded account of how gender roles are constructed through role positioning, action patterns, evaluative language, and moral framing.

The findings address the research questions in three main ways. First, male and female characters are represented through recurring differences in narrative roles and actions. Female characters often appear in domestic, caregiving, or household-economic contexts and are

frequently framed through cautionary outcomes, while male characters more often appear in narratives involving livelihood labor, evaluative speech, or publicly visible consequence.

Second, the analysis identifies patterned associations between gender and authority, labor, caregiving, and moral evaluation. Male characters more often occupy evaluative or interpretive roles, while female authority appears primarily within domestic or caregiving contexts. Female characters are frequently linked to household production and caregiving responsibilities, whereas male characters are more often associated with livelihood work and public action. Moral framing often reinforces these differences by attaching cautionary lessons to female-centered narratives and lessons about labor, conduct, or interpretation to male-centered ones.

Third, the findings suggest that Aesop's fables can inform the use of traditional narratives in critical language education. Rather than presenting these stories solely as moral lessons, teachers can encourage learners to examine how narratives represent authority, responsibility, and social roles. In this way, fables can support critical literacy by helping students reflect on how texts construct social meaning.

This study contributes to research on gender representation in educational texts by showing that traditional moral narratives, not only modern textbooks, may reproduce gendered expectations through the distribution of roles, actions, and moral evaluation. It also demonstrates how feminist discourse perspectives can be operationalized through a small set of transparent coding dimensions for analyzing narrative texts. Because the corpus is small and drawn from a single English translation, the findings should be understood as patterns within this dataset rather than claims about the Aesopic tradition as a whole. Future research could extend the analysis to a larger corpus or examine how learners interpret gender representation when these stories are used in critical literacy activities. Although Aesop's fables remain valuable resources for language education, examining them critically can help learners recognize how narratives communicate assumptions about identity, responsibility, and social roles.

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Appendix

Appendix A. Summary of coded excerpts and analytical interpretations

Fable	Key excerpt from the text	Coding dimension	Analytical interpretation	Contribution to findings
The Widow and the Sheep	“A certain poor widow had one solitary sheep... she sheared him herself.”	Role positioning	Widow portrayed in a situation of economic vulnerability requiring self-reliance	Female characters frequently appear in narratives involving household survival and limited economic resources
The Old Woman and the Wine-Jar	“O most delicious! How nice must the wine itself have been...”	Evaluative language	Narrative evaluates the sensory memory of the wine and the value attached to past experience	Female characters occasionally appear in reflective narratives emphasizing sensory appreciation or memory
The Milk-Woman and Her Pail	“The money for which this milk will be sold will buy... eggs.”	Action patterns	Character imagines economic advancement through domestic market activity	Female economic roles are represented through household-based labor and small-scale planning
The Woman and Her Hen	“She determined to give the hen a double allowance of barley.”	Action patterns	Character attempts to increase household productivity through domestic management	Female characters are frequently associated with household economic decision-making, which in several narratives is later framed through cautionary moral outcomes.
The Mother and the Wolf	“Be quiet, or I will throw you out... and the wolf shall eat you.”	Role positioning	Mother positioned as authority figure responsible for disciplining and protecting child	Female characters frequently associated with caregiving and parental authority

The Man and His Wife	“The herdsmen and shepherds cast on me looks of aversion.”	Role positioning	Husband evaluates wife’s behavior and interprets social reactions	Male characters positioned as evaluators and interpreters of social behavior
The Monkeys and Their Mother	“The mother fondles one... but neglects the other.”	Evaluative language	Narrative evaluates maternal care through contrasting outcomes	Maternal behavior becomes a site of moral evaluation within caregiving roles.
The Fisherman and His Nets	“A fisherman... captured a great haul of fish.”	Action patterns	Male character depicted through skilled labor and livelihood activity	Male characters associated with economic work and public activity
The Thief and His Mother	“She not only abstained from beating him, but encouraged him.”	Moral framing	Early parental encouragement of wrongdoing leads to later punishment	Maternal responsibility framed as a moral cause of social failure
The Brother and the Sister	“You... make up for your lack of beauty by your virtues.”	Evaluative language	Daughter’s moral value evaluated in contrast to her appearance	Gender expectations linked to virtue, behavior, and social character
