

## “HerStory”

### *Challenging Gender Stereotypes in Israeli Girls’ Perfect Love Stories*

Shiri Reznik

This study explores the love stories written by 77 Israeli girls, aged 11-12 years old, in order to examine the possible influence of the media on their romantic narratives and the gender roles embedded within them. The girls were asked to write their own perfect love story and then participated in focus groups during which they explained the stories they wrote. The stories have been analyzed with the method of discourse analysis. Although many girls chose to express their imaginary romantic world by using popular media characters, plot lines and idioms, others offered a new and even revolutionary perspective on what a perfect love story can be, and especially the gender roles it can depict. Stories about female protagonists who make the first romantic move, perform sisterhood as an act of resistance, or prefer to be an assertive non-stereotypical princess, are analyzed in light of the girls’ socioeconomic backgrounds and role models.

If you had to imagine the perfect love story what would it be? This study aims to find out how tween Israeli girls perceive the concept of romantic love, what are their expectations regarding gender roles in the romantic sphere, and how do they imagine an ideal love story when given the opportunity to write their own romantic narrative.

Another goal of the current study is to examine the possible influence of the media on girls’ romantic perceptions and dreams, since numerous studies have found that mediated representations of love are meaningful sources of identification, social learning, and internalization of romantic narratives and behaviors among children, teens and adults as well (Bachen & Illouz, 1996; Hefner & Wilson, 2013). This influence is especially relevant in the case of young girls who are the main target audience of the romantic genre (Lemish, Liebes, & Seidmann, 2001).

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## Media and romance

Awareness to the role media play in the construction of romantic perceptions led to several studies that tried to identify what kind of messages are being transferred through romantic texts from a variety of genres, such as fairy tales (Rowe, 1979) and Disney movies (Stover, 2013). A central theme that has emerged from these content analyses was the oppressive gender roles portrayed in many romantic relationships. In these mediated love stories women's subordination is presented as romantically desirable and rewarding, and love is a mythical force without which there is no real purpose to the heroine's life. Men, by contrast, are depicted as leaders, heroic warriors, and the brave rescuers of helpless "damsels in distress". Furthermore, female friendships, which can be an alternative and empowering net of support, are also often left aside in favor of heterosexual romance (Rich, 1980).

At the same time, other researchers have found that young girls are capable of interpreting romantic stories in a variety of ways, engage actively in negotiations with them, and extract messages that correspond to their individual subjective perceptions, as well as interpretative communities (Aidman, 1999; Reznik & Lemish, 2011).

Hence, if girls can interpret romantic representations in different ways and produce opposing and critical readings, can they also construct new narratives of romance which will not conform to the hegemonic discourse? Can they become active media makers whose independent creation will portray more equal gender roles? Previous studies suggest that the answer to this question is complex: some researchers found that girls can resist mainstream media and create revolutionary and empowering gender representations in the form of feminist zines and films (Ferris, 2001; Kearney, 2006). However, Banet-Weiser (2011) found that when uploading films to YouTube teen girls tend to present themselves in sexual and self objectifying ways, reinforcing oppressive gender roles.

When focusing more specifically on the creation of romantic narratives the findings suggest that girls and boys tend to duplicate the subject positions and romantic repertoires offered by popular culture. For example, the Greek teens who wrote love stories focusing on stereotypical repertoires like "Cinderella and the prince" and "the assertive boy and permissive girl" (Deliyianni-Kouimtzi and Lentza, 2008), or the Norwegian 12 years old boys and girls, who wrote love stories which depicted male brave heroes, and female protagonists who were willing to forgive every behavior and sacrifice different aspects of their lives in order to maintain the romantic relationship (Haldar, 2013).

While these two studies did not focus on the young writers' socioeconomic backgrounds, the current research takes this aspect into consideration as it was found to have influence on the development of romantic beliefs, and the ability to criticize and even reject the popular romantic discourse offered by the media (Aidman, 1999; Reznik & Lemish, 2011). Have the Israeli girls duplicated the mediated romantic conventions and stereotypical gender roles like their Greek and Norwegian counterparts, or have

they created alternative narratives of romance? The answer to this intriguing question is further explored.

## The study's methodology

The data gathering for this study<sup>1</sup> included 77 love stories written in 2008 by Israeli tween girls ages 11 to 12. Among them, 39 came from well-to-do, non-religious backgrounds and lived in the center of Israel; the remaining 38 tweens had lower-class, religiously traditional backgrounds and lived in the northern periphery of Israel. The research subjects were recruited through their schools, and participation followed parents' completion of consent forms, as well as detailed questionnaires describing their family's background. The analyses revealed that these two groups, who differed by socioeconomic status (SES) and geographical location, held distinctly different views about romantic love and gender roles, hence they are referred to as high and low SES groups (HSES and LSES) in the presentation of findings below.

The two groups of girls received an envelope from their teachers with two blank pages and a form that included the following instruction: “If you were to imagine the perfect love story- what would it be? Write the story on the pages attached. The story could be anything you can think of and it will be read only by the researcher.” The teachers directed the girls to submit the forms within one week of receiving them and ensured these forms will be read only by the researcher.

The love stories have been analyzed with the method of discourse analysis, focusing on the gender roles and subject positions embedded within them. This form of analysis examines the available resources that people draw on in order to create a text. These resources are known as “*interpretative repertoires*”, which are “clusters of terms, descriptions and figures of speech often assembled around metaphors. They are resources for making evaluation, constructing factual versions, and performing particular actions” (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Thus, through repetitive readings of the stories the main plotlines, motives, romantic myths and gender roles were identified.

The discourse analysis of the girls' love stories also incorporated a focused search for “*media traces*” (Götz, Lemish, Aidman, & Moon, 2005), which refer to the use of media in order to articulate and express meaningful actions, thoughts and experiences. Media traces include the explicit and implicit indicators that point to the specific media text through which the girls chose to express their romantic world. For example, mentioning the name of a media text in the story, or adopting key characters and plot lines that appear in it.

In addition to writing love stories the girls of this study further participated in focus groups, where they have been asked about their romantic beliefs and expectations, as well as the sources of inspiration for writing their own love stories. These interviews were conducted in 19 focus groups composed of close friends, and were recorded and

transcribed verbatim. Multi-stage grounded analyses of the transcripts followed common qualitative procedures (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Quotes incorporated in the following pages were translated into English by the author with great sensitivity in order to maintain the personal flavor of each young writer, while facilitating accessibility for the English reader.

## Challenging gender stereotypes in the romantic sphere

While reading through the girls' love stories it became clear that the media's influence on their romantic imagination was powerful and significant. "Media traces" were easily identified in many love stories, when the girls chose to express their imaginary romantic world by using popular media idioms ("Once upon a time", "And they lived happily ever after"), media characters (using names of reality television stars, or describing a love interest as resembling the American actor Zac Efron), and media plot lines (a couple meeting by re-enacting the story from the movie "*High School Musical*").

However, some of the stories the girls wrote offered a new and sometimes even revolutionary perspective on what a perfect love story can be, and especially the gender roles it can depict. While some girls chose to follow the well known gender roles of the "damsel in distress" waiting to be discovered and saved by the male brave protagonist, others wrote stories that did not conform to the norm and even deliberately disrupted the hegemonic romantic discourse.

Overall, 24 stories out of the 77 written for this study (almost a third) were classified as "gender challenging", since they portrayed a non stereotypical female protagonist who dares to make the first romantic move and fight for her love, or one who is willing to give up her romantic relationship with a boy in order to maintain the relationship with her female best friend. The gender challenging stories were divided into three main themes which will further be explained and discussed: "making the first move", "alternative princesses" and "sisterhood as an act of resistance".

## Making the first move

The stories suggest that traditional romantic gender roles, where the masculine side initiates the relationship while the feminine side passively awaits his courtship, are still present in the romantic consciousness of most tween girls in this research. Consequently, many female protagonists chose to only implicitly hint their romantic interest, using various courting techniques like waving their hair, exchanging flirtatious looks, or by nurturing their appearance in order to attract the attention of the boy they like.

Yet, another kind of heroines also emerged while reading the girls' love stories, when some of the young writers vividly described girls who were assertive and bold enough

to show straight forward romantic initiative. An example of such a female protagonist can be seen in the following quote, taken from a story written by a girl from the LSES group, describing a dialogue between the heroine and her best friend and later another with the boy she’s in love with:

Naama: Well, I think Noam is a really cute, good looking boy, right? Maya: So? Naama: It’s really difficult for me to say it, but... I love him. Maya: So now what? Naama: He doesn’t even notice me! Maya: So, tell him, this way he’ll at least be aware of it. Naama: Maybe, we’ll see...  
When Passover evening arrived Naama called him and said: Noam, can I have a minute? Noam: Hurry up! I haven’t got all day! Naama: I love you. Noam: Ha ha ha... Naama: I’m not kidding. Noam: What?? Naama: What you just heard- I love you! Noam: Really? I love you too...

The female protagonist bravely confesses her love and doesn’t withdraw even when facing a short tempered boy who finally comes around and cooperates with her. This straight forward approach appeared in another story written in the LSES group, when the heroine does not give up and finally wins the heart of the boy she fancies:

Yarden did everything in order to get Noam: she sent him letters, called him everyday- but he didn’t pay her any attention whatsoever. Until one day she went to school and very seriously told him: Noam, I’ve been keeping this in my heart for a long time now, and... Noam: Well, what did you want to tell me? Yarden: I wanted to tell you that I love you and I want us to be girlfriend and boyfriend. Do you agree? Noam was completely shocked! He finally said: I’ll get back to you at the next recess, sweetie... Noam said it very enthusiastically and smiled, and from his “sweetie” I already knew it’s going to be a Yes...

It is worthwhile noticing that the assertive and norm-braking female protagonists like those mentioned above were more common in stories written by the *lower* SES group, which included girls who came from less educated families with stronger religious beliefs. Such protagonists were found in a third of the stories written by this group, compared to one fifth of the stories written by girls from the HSES group.

A possible explanation for this surprising finding can be based on the conclusions of the clinical psychologist Mary Pipher, who in her book “*Reviving Ophelia: Saving the selves of adolescent girls*” claims that girls from low cultural and socio-economic background tend to show more resilience, courage and initiative than other, more privileged girls their age (Pipher, 1994). Therefore, it is possible to assume that the rough living conditions of girls from the LSES group can be the basis for their tendency to imagine active and determined heroines, who can change their lives by themselves and do not have to wait passively for a better fate to come, depending on some exterior factor which can not necessarily be trusted.

Indeed, as one of the LSES girls bluntly said: “I think girls don’t have to sit and wait for the messiah to come, because he won’t. They should ask the boy they like out and stop being so shy!”. This girl further explained that she has understood that things in her life do not always come easy, therefore one should not wait for things to happen by themselves, but get up and do something about it.

### Alternative princesses

When one thinks of a perfect love story the well known repertoire of the beautiful princess saved by her prince charming and then living happily ever after may come to mind. However, both the LSES and the HSES girls chose to negotiate with the character of the stereotypical princess, and designed new and alternative princesses who disrupt the hegemonic discourse and the normative power relations between men and women. Such rebellious princess, for example, was described in a story called “fighting for love” written by a girl from the HSES group:

Once upon a time there was a kingdom located in a small village and there lived 3 princesses: Mika, Adi and Natalie. Natalie was special. She was a warrior who never waited to be saved. Like every other girl she dreamt of her own love story. One day she went for a walk in the forest and as she was walking by the lovely blooming flowers she suddenly saw a mysterious young man. When he passed near her she felt a strange feeling and quickly ran away. The next day she met him again, walked towards him and asked him: Did you feel it too? And he replied: Yes, where are my good manners? My name is Yaniv and what’s yours? She answered: Natalie, nice to meet you. They began chatting and didn’t notice that hours have passed...

As the story unfolds the couple falls in love and discovers that their families come from rival kingdoms, nevertheless the two refuse to fight each other and convince their families to end the war between the kingdoms and celebrate the young couple’s marriage. After writing this unusual story this HSES girl was interviewed about her sources of inspiration and explained that:

I think it’s all because of these fairy tales where children see that the boys always save the girls and they understand it from there... that’s why I relate to things I personally find to be true. I like to watch TV shows like “Naruto” (a Japanese manga series- S.R.). Shows about wars where the girls save the boys. Some girls find these shows frightening, but I’m not scared.

It is interesting to see how girls who wrote gender challenging stories also actively look for powerful female role models in the media, and select the contents they are exposed to depending on the gender roles they portray.

Another example of an alternative princess, who makes the first romantic move and disobey her parents, can be found in the following story written by a girl from the LSES group, who describes an adventurous princess who would have preferred to be less privileged:

Once upon a time there was a princess named Matilda, but she didn't like being a princess. She would have preferred being one of the simple people and not a princess! No one could influence her with his words or actions- she wasn't willing to compromise... One day she escaped the palace dressed as a servant. She was strolling around when suddenly a boy caught her eye. She ran after him but he didn't pay her any attention. The princess was disappointed and hurt but she didn't give up. She followed the boy and discovered he's poor and working in the circus trying to take care of his family. She loved this boy and wouldn't give up- first she tried talking to him but he was too busy, later she went to his house but he wasn't there, then she tried visiting his house again and this time luckily he was there. She told him she was princess Matilda and that she's fallen in love with him. He couldn't believe it...

The story happily ends with Matilda's luxurious wedding after she convinced her reluctant parents that this is all for the best, and that the young lovers can overcome their different backgrounds and find common ground.

### Sisterhood as an act of resistance

Another salient theme which emerged from the girls' love stories was the presence of different dramatic obstacles which the couple had to overcome in order to fulfill their love. One of the common obstacles was the “Romantic triangle”, in which the heroine is forced to compete with her female best friend for the love of the same boy. This complex situation leads to a difficult conflict of loyalty, as the heroine has to understand her priorities and decide who comes first- heterosexual romance or sisterhood, or maybe there is a strategy to combine both?

While in stories written by the LSES group the male side was favored at the expense of the female friendship (which was often presented as fickle and full of intrigue), it is fascinating to see that the HSES girls chose to resolve these same triangles by preferring sisterhood over the romantic heterosexual relationship. One example of this preference can be seen in the following story:

Mom, I need you to help me! Roni and Omer were a couple, but he broke up with her because he loves me. I said I'd be his girlfriend since I love him too, but then I told Roni about it and she yelled “What?!” and ran away. I don't know what to do now. Dana's mother: maybe you hurt her feelings since not long ago

she was his girlfriend and maybe she still loves him? Dana: Wow, I guess you're right. Poor Roni, what have I done? And we're best friends!

Later in Roni's house: Oh, Roni I'm really-really sorry. I don't know what I was thinking. I will make it up to you- I promise. I'm going to break up with him tomorrow! Roni was silent for a while and then finally said: oh well, how can I not forgive you? I yelled- Yes!! Great, so you're coming to the mall with me? You are my BFF! (Best friend forever). Yes BFF, I'm coming...

Preferring your best friend over a romantic relationship is depicted in another story written by a girl from the HSES group, called "friendship is the best":

Yoav and I became a couple and I think my best friend Maya was sad. I asked her what happened and she answered she's sorry she can't be happy for me, but she really loves Yoav. I thought about it a lot and decided to do something about it. I wrote Yoav a note saying: I'm so sorry but I want us to break up. I love you but my friendship with Maya comes first! When he saw the note he was sad but I knew I did the right thing. Maya understood how much I love her and told me: Way to go! Only now I've realized what a wonderful caring friend you are. We'll be together through thick and thin and nobody can separate us anymore! (Especially not boys!)

Since that day Maya and I are loyal to each other like we've never been before. And what about the boys? Each one of us found her own!

Here we can see how the two friends prefer to stay loyal to each other, and will not let heterosexual romance come between them. As they realize their priorities they renew their vows, not unlike the well known wedding ceremony, declaring that they will stay together through thick and thin. Unlike the previous example, in this story sisterhood can go together with having romantic relationships with boys, when each of the female friends finds her own beloved.

The tendency of the HSES girls to prefer sisterhood over romantic relationships with boys is in congruence with the findings of Walton, Weatherall and Jackson (2002) who analyzed stories about conflict written by American girls aged 9-12. The American girls described romantic triangles similar to those mentioned by the Israeli girls of the current study, and like them they also chose to resolve this conflict by favoring the female side of the triangle.

According to Walton, Weatherall and Jackson (2002) these girls' perspective has a revolutionary potential, since it can disrupt the hegemonic oppressive discourse about femininity as well as romance. The discourse the girls have created in their stories functions as an empowering alternative to stereotypes like "women are not to be trusted", or the myth that female friendship can not last since women always compete against each other for the romantic attention of men. Breaking this myth and replacing it with



an emphasis on sisterhood can encourage young girls to develop a confident and more powerful identity, without limiting themselves to the narrow subject positions the dominant discourse has to offer.

## Conclusion

Given the unequal representation of girls and women in the media in general, and in children’s media in particular, where girls are outnumbered and stereotypically portrayed (Götz & Herche, 2012), it is inspiring to see how when given the opportunity young girls can create their own independent romantic narratives, and break traditional gender stereotypes.

Whether it is the princess who is also a brave fighter, or other female protagonists who initiate the romantic relationship, or even choose to give it up all together while preferring to be committed to their female best friend- the young writers of the current study showed agency, creativity and their ability to improvise and reject the common romantic gender roles constructed by the media.

One of the surprising findings of this study was that the girls from the *lower* SES group were the ones who showed more initiative in the romantic sphere, in the stories they wrote as well as in their own lives. This active behavior occurred despite the fact they come from a more conservative background than girls from the HSES group, as well as from families in which parents emphasize religious values of modesty and respect, which do not necessarily encourage a rebellious nature or undermining existing boundaries of gender stereotypes.

On the other hand, it is interesting to see that despite the reluctance of most girls from the HSES group to initiate their own romantic relationships, they were not without power in the romantic sphere, but found other path of action through which to establish the position of a powerful, self-aware and active agent. This path included avoiding heterosexual romantic relations and setting an alternative for the establishment of a strong feminine identity, which can be acquired through strong female bonds with close friends.

In the spirit of Virginia Woolf’s iconic book “*A room of one’s own*” (1929), where she suggested female students to rewrite history and discover the story of all the unknown women who were excluded from the pages of history since their story was considered insignificant, the girls of the current study rewrote the narrative of romance and thus found their own story and their own voice. They have articulated “*HerStory*”, a term coined by Robin Morgan (1970), referring to the revolutionary act of writing history from a feminist perspective. Accordingly, the girls created a narrative which is not limited by the patriarchal gender norms, but one who allows them to express their genuine selves and their individual beliefs. Their stories offer empowering female role models who can influence their own behavior, as well as other girls’ perceptions and ambitions, because “if she can see it- or better yet write it by herself- she can be it”.

## Notes

1. The current study of love stories is based on the author's Ph.D. dissertation, entitled: "What's love got to do with it: The role media play in the construction of the romantic love concept among girls from the periphery and center of Israel", written at Tel Aviv University under the supervision of Prof. Dafna Lemish.

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