

Rewriting Narratives: Gender Representation in AI-Driven Storytelling

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Introduction

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) in storytelling and media production has opened a realm of possibilities, offering new ways to challenge traditional gender stereotypes and foster inclusivity. However, this transformative potential also comes with risks—AI systems often mirror the biases embedded in their training data, perpetuating outdated norms and reinforcing inequities. As both a media ethics researcher and an advocate for cultural representation, I examine how AI technologies can either limit or liberate gender narratives, with a focus on global and cross-cultural storytelling.

AI's role in shaping cultural and societal norms cannot be overstated. With its increasing presence in media, advertising, and entertainment, it serves as a powerful medium for reflecting and influencing public perception. For regions like the Middle East, including Iran, where traditional gender roles significantly shape societal structures, AI offers both challenges and opportunities for driving progressive change.

The Challenges of Gender Representation in AI

AI-generated content frequently inherits biases from historical datasets, amplifying stereotypical portrayals of gender roles. For instance, studies have shown that language models often associate men with leadership qualities and women with caregiving traits. In visual storytelling, such biases can manifest through skewed character portrayals—for example, women might appear predominantly as mothers, teachers, or assistants, while men dominate as heroes, innovators, or decision-makers.

These challenges become even more pronounced in culturally diverse contexts. In Iran, gender norms are deeply intertwined with social narratives that shape everyday life, media, and policy. AI-driven media could risk reinforcing these norms if not consciously designed to challenge stereotypes. For example, Persian films and animations often depict men as the decision-makers and women as passive participants in family or societal dynamics. Transposing these representations into AI-generated narratives without critical intervention could perpetuate the status quo.

Moreover, interactive media like video games or advertising often reinforce these biases. In gaming, female characters are frequently hypersexualized or relegated to supporting roles. AI, when deployed without ethical oversight, risks automating such biases at an unprecedented scale, affecting not only creative industries but also societal attitudes.

The Role of Propp's Methodology

Vladimir Propp's narrative functions provide a valuable lens for critically analyzing AI-generated stories. Propp's framework identifies seven archetypes—such as the hero, villain, and helper—that shape a story's structure. This methodology offers a structured way to evaluate whether AI technologies replicate traditional archetypes or create opportunities for diverse, empowered character roles.

For example, AI tools used in filmmaking or gaming often rely on algorithms trained to generate archetypal characters. By applying Propp's methodology, developers can consciously redesign these archetypes. Imagine a reimagined narrative where the “hero” archetype is embodied by a woman from a marginalized background, showcasing resilience and leadership. Similarly, the “helper” archetype could become a mentor advocating for equality rather than merely assisting the protagonist.

This approach also opens avenues for integrating cultural diversity into storytelling. In Iranian folklore, characters like Simorgh—mythical creatures symbolizing wisdom and guidance—could be reintroduced into modern narratives as empowering figures, challenging both local and global stereotypes about gender and identity.

Case Study: Animation and Empowerment

My work teaching animation to Afghan women immigrants in Iran highlights the potential of visual media to rewrite gendered narratives. Animation workshops allowed these women to craft stories reflecting their lived experiences, resilience, and aspirations. By becoming the protagonists of their own stories, they disrupted traditional representations of women in Afghan and Iranian media.

Similarly, AI technologies hold promise for amplifying marginalized voices. Tools like generative art platforms and text-to-image software enable creators to produce high-quality content without extensive resources. However, these tools must be ethically guided. For example, an AI-driven animation platform could empower women from underrepresented communities to create stories showcasing their achievements, but it must avoid embedding biases that might inadvertently diminish their agency or reinforce stereotypes.

The transformative power of animation lies in its ability to connect audiences emotionally. When coupled with AI, this medium could reach broader audiences, presenting narratives that challenge societal norms. For instance, AI-generated animations could depict women scientists, entrepreneurs, or community leaders in culturally sensitive ways, inspiring new generations to question traditional roles.

Health Communication and Gender Narratives

Health communication is another critical area where AI-driven storytelling can play a transformative role. Traditional health campaigns often overlook women's unique experiences or frame them within restrictive stereotypes, such as portraying women solely as caregivers rather than active decision-makers in their health journeys.

AI has the potential to bridge these gaps by creating personalized, culturally sensitive stories that empower women to take charge of their reproductive health or navigate complex healthcare systems. For example, AI-driven animations could illustrate patient journeys, showcasing diverse female experiences with pregnancy, childbirth, or chronic illnesses. Such narratives not only inform but also advocate for equitable healthcare access.

Moreover, these tools can help dismantle taboos surrounding women's health in conservative societies. In Iran, discussions around reproductive health often face cultural resistance. AI-driven storytelling could create safe, engaging, and non-confrontational ways to educate women about their rights and options, fostering greater agency and awareness.

Towards Ethical AI Storytelling

To achieve meaningful change, interdisciplinary collaborations are essential. Addressing gender bias in AI requires input from technologists, media ethicists, and gender studies scholars. Together, they can develop algorithms that prioritize inclusivity and fairness.

One promising approach is embedding ethical principles directly into AI systems. For instance, AI developers could design training datasets that emphasize diverse and equitable representations of gender roles. Propp's methodology could serve as a guiding framework, ensuring that narratives remain coherent while challenging stereotypes. By deliberately crafting archetypes that celebrate diversity—such as empowering “helpers” or reimagining “villains” as systemic injustices rather than individuals—AI can drive socially progressive storytelling.

Regulatory frameworks and industry standards are equally important. Policymakers must ensure that AI technologies used in media production adhere to ethical guidelines, particularly in regions with entrenched gender disparities. Collaboration with local communities can further enhance the cultural relevance and authenticity of these narratives.

Conclusion

The intersection of AI, storytelling, and gender representation holds immense potential for reshaping media landscapes. By combining ethical storytelling practices with cutting-edge technologies, we can challenge stereotypes, empower marginalized groups, and inspire cultural transformation. However, this requires intentionality—AI must be guided by ethical principles, cultural awareness, and a commitment to diversity.

As researchers and practitioners, it is our responsibility to ensure that AI becomes a tool for liberation rather than limitation. By fostering collaboration across disciplines and embedding inclusivity into the heart of storytelling technologies, we can craft narratives that reflect the complexity and richness of human experiences, paving the way for a more equitable media future.