Rattlings from the gender prison: A look at contemporary Indian children's literature

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Abstract

This paper analyzes selected works of Indian children's literature, both short stories and novels, to tackle the problem of sexism. Sexism constitutes discrimination between the sexes, preventing girls and women from their full emotional and intellectual development in their struggle for a full humanity in their own right. This struggle finds representation even in contemporary children's literature. The main characters in the works selected for this presentation are nearly all female, though one interesting case involves the evolution of a male protagonist in gender awareness. The female protagonists are strong and determined while the male protagonist learns to recognize the power of woman. He also becomes awakened and frees himself from stereotypical gender roles.

Introduction

India is a BRIC, an acronym for the new rich countries of Brazil, Russian, India, and China. Today, the boom in economy, innovative technologies and improved infrastructure has become the nation's pride. Although the country has witnessed advancements in many fields, a bias against female offspring is still a prevalent social problem. This stems from the fact that India is an extremely patriarchal society, and the desire for a male child is widespread. The production of male offspring is considered by some to be a man's highest duty, and even a religious necessity. Thus, male children are desired more than female children. This cultural preference for boys leads to sex-selective abortion. The problem continues and almost 7,000 of India's unborn baby girls are killed every day, according to the annual United Nations report.

on children. Although the Indian government has made it illegal to perform ultrasounds and abortions for the purpose of sex-selection, the practice is widespread and shows no signs of slowing. Wealthier people are the worst offenders, since they can afford the cost of testing for gender identification. Female abortion is often seen in the northern districts of the country, including the Punjab and Haryana states as reported by the AFP.

Moreover, females are often viewed as an economic burden. It is estimated that the cost of raising a daughter in India, which would include marriage, setting up a home, and childbearing, can be up to 70,000 rupees (about US$ 2,258). A girl’s dowry, about 50,000 rupees (about US$ 1,613), is included in the cost of raising a daughter. This may not seem like a lot of money to people in Western countries. However, the price is very high for a poor family in India making 20 rupees a day (65 US cents). This of course does not excuse infanticide, but rather shows the roots of the problem, which should be treated and eradicated.

In fact the Government of India has initiated several measures to eliminate the problems of deprivation and discrimination faced by girls, for example, the decadal plan of action called “The National Plan of Action for the Girl Child (NPA) 1991–2000”. It is for ensuring the survival, protection and development of children with a special gender sensitivity built in for girl children as well as adolescent girls. This plan seeks to prevent female foeticide and infanticide, eliminate gender discrimination, provide safe drinking water and fodder near homes, and to rehabilitate and protect girls from exploitation, assault and abuse. The government’s national policy of education and the Action Research Project on “The Girl Child and the Family” are also aimed at formulation of programs to improve the status of the girl child.

In addition to the kind of strategic planning involved in the Action Plan, the Government of India attaches great importance to those efforts which trigger changes in social attitudes towards women. An integrated media campaign projecting a positive image of both women and the girl child through electronics, print, films and media is the most important component of the government’s communication strategy. A large number of TV spots, documentary films, and radio programs have been produced by the Department
of Women and Child Welfare to propagate messages to bring about attitude change. With the cooperation of planners, policy makers, and the enforcement machinery, a countrywide gender sensitization program was launched in 1991. So far, the states of Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Bihar, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Punjab, and Delhi have been covered.\(^{11}\)

Children’s literary texts are another way of propagating messages to bring about change in attitudes towards females. In line with the government’s campaign, some authors of children’s literary texts written since 2000 have tackled the problem of sexism in their books. Sexism entails the practice of various forms of discrimination based on sexual difference.\(^{12}\) Two basic criteria can be used for the detection of sexism.\(^{13}\)

First, sexism can be found in the text, illustrations of textbooks and children’s literature when the depiction of men and women, boys and girls, is based on stereotyped activities that do not accurately reflect the diversity of their roles. The first sign of sexism is the refusal to acknowledge social reality and the diversity of situations, resulting in the same depiction of male and female roles. Secondly, sexism is also presented in textbooks which show an existing sexist situation without offering criticism or any alternative. This amounts to a tacit acceptance of the inequalities and discriminatory behavior afflicting girls and women in most societies today. This traditional sexism has negative effects on both sexes although the damage is more considerable for girls who are trapped in passive and dependent roles.

Sexist stereotypes, which are themselves products of inequality between the sexes, in turn become the source of further discrimination between the sexes. The younger the child, the less well equipped he or she is to resist the powerful stereotypes that incline him or her to see the opposite sex as having conventional attributes, qualities, or failings. Thus young children are led to attribute mythical qualities to boys, and to look down on girls.\(^{14}\) Some authors attempt to avoid sexism and portray roles outside of the gender\(^{15}\) that curtails female freedom and development as well as imprisoning boys in gender stereotype.\(^{16}\) According to Pat Pinsent, “books which omit females or only portray them in subservient or
limited roles can be disempowering to female readers and are likely simply to confirm the unconscious prejudices of the male reader.”

Actually, some Indian children’s literary texts written before the year 2000 did include portrayals of boys and girls as being equal to respond to a special appeal on the part of UNICEF in the Year of the Girl Child (1985–1986). However, I think the texts before 2000 do not have the same gender sensitivity as texts written since 2000. This article looks at Indian children’s literary texts since 2000 which question stereotypical gender roles and portray active, courageous, feisty, strong, and determined girl protagonists. Five literary works by female authors will be examined: *Aditi and the One-eye Monkey* (2000) by Suniti Namjoshi, *Just a Train Ride Away* (2006) by Mini Shrinivasan, *Delivery Girl* (2004), *Do You Want to Play Football?* (2004), and *When Haria Comes* (2004) by Deepa Agarwal.

**Subverting the traditional fairy tale**

In this section I look at *Aditi and the One-Eyed Monkey*. In the story, Princess Aditi has become the servant of a dragon. Otherwise, her kingdom will be destroyed. As the story progresses, the princess travels to the dragon’s cave in order to negotiate peace. She succeeds in her task and the dragon becomes a friend. This plot is somewhat unusual. In more traditional tales of dragons and princesses, the princess is captive until being rescued by a prince. Stith Thompson has classified such tales in the group of “R. Captives and Fugitives,” more especially in the group, “R111.1.3 Rescue of princess (maiden) from dragon.” Antti Aarne would classify this tale as “tale-type 300 The Dragon-Slayer. Rescue of the princess,” with two variants: (a) A princess is demanded as a sacrifice, and (b) a princess is exposed to a dragon and offered to her rescuer in marriage. This type of story can be found in books from many European countries. In Asia, only in India and Indonesia is this type of tale told. However, in Aditi’s story the princess can save herself. No prince appears. This is to imply that a prince is not an essential element in a story of a beleaguered princess.

Rewritten fairy tales require careful scrutiny. Such tales can show us how the old stories suppressed the invisible, the untold,
and the unspoken. This potential is realized by changing the mode of representation as well as, and more than, changing the content. Since the focus in Aditi's story is on the role the princess plays, we ought to be aware of the story as non-traditional. Far from the passivity, helplessness, and dependence found in traditional tales, Aditi possesses self-esteem and self-confidence. She is a rare, positive model for female readers. Her appearance serves to wake girls up and demonstrate the validity of self-confidence. The name of the protagonist is significant. “Aditi” means “no limit.” If the author intends, as we can imagine she does, to have us identify with Aditi, this can be a call to the limitlessness of a girls’ potential.

Biographical information regarding the author also suggests her interest in creating and encouraging autonomous female characters. It is known that she is an openly lesbian feminist. Such data reinforces our inclination to believe that the writer is hardly interested in reinforcing stereotypical gender roles, and might not instill a patriarchal ideology in her work. Instead, she focuses on the female protagonist’s courage and self-confidence.

Representing the self-independent princess might be an attempt to introduce a new girl by using fantasy. Tomlinson and Lynch-Brown suggest:

Children can increase their ability to think divergently through modern fantasy. In fantasies, the normal “rules” of the physical world are suspended, permitting the reader to gain a new perspective on the world of reality. Children can consider other ways of living, other ways the world might have been, or perhaps other ways the world might become.

Thus the Princess Aditi story can be used to illuminate “the new world of reality.” To represent the autonomous and self-independent princess is to reject the image of the female protagonist as moral deviant, an image often seen in Indian folktales such as Pancatantra which claims:

Women, after all, have loose morals and do all sorts of reckless things.

It is not too exaggerated to say that the new type of heroine represented by Princess Aditi helps broaden positive thinking towards females.
Being a strong and determined girl

Representing the strong and determined girl is a project found not only in Princess Aditi’s story but also in the selected stories of Deepa Agarwal. In this section I will examine *Delivery Girl, Do You Want to Play Football?*, and *When Haria Comes*. These three selected stories employ realism to reflect the way of life and problems of the main protagonists.

The story of *Delivery Girl* is told by Radha, a twelve year old, living together with her mother in a slum. She has to leave school and help her mother earn a living. But she does not stop studying. She still attends an evening class held by social workers. One day a head gangster hires her as one of his delivery girls. She accepts his proposal but she has doubts about it and questions herself:

Is this really washing powder...? If not... what is it I’m delivering?

Radha is certain that she is delivering drugs not washing powder as her boss told her. She does not want to do it but she is not brave enough to decline.

What was she to do? How could she continue to be Santo dada’s delivery girl... knowing what she was delivering? But... would he let her go? Even the thought of telling him made her sick with apprehension.

Although she earns more money from delivering drugs, she thinks that being a delivery girl may lead to an unhappy ending. She believes she can avoid any ill-fate if she holds her destiny in her own hands. She asks for help from her teacher in the evening class. She knows well that she cannot manage this problem by herself. Radha’s way of solving her problem may influence readers not to keep their problems secret. This story comes to a happy ending after Radha decides to ask for help. The head gangster is arrested by the police officers. Radha is given a reward. She is able to attend school again. Probably, we call this “poetic justice” for Radha. Being able to attend school is the reward for her bravery and right decision for righteousness instead of money.

Not only Radha in *Delivery Girl* dares to speak up, but also Madhuli in *When Haria Comes*. This heroine is also active and
courageous. Madhuli is an orphan living with her blind grandmother in a rural area. Her older brother is an unskilled laborer in the city. Her grandmother lives in hope that her grandson will earn enough money for her eye operation. This expectation reflects the way of thought of most Indian people who have hope for their sons. This mentality is influenced by patriarchal ideology. Thus, it is interesting to see Madhuli’s query:

Why can’t I do anything on my own? She had thought despairingly.  

Girls are taught to be obedient. They are taught to depend on men, not their own selves. To refuse to accept the female self is to make women lack their independence and confidence. In order to make her protagonist self-confident, the author gives her protagonist the chance to rescue her grandmother’s life. One evening, Madhuli’s grandmother has a terrible stomachache. Madhuli asks her neighbors to send her grandmother to a new hospital. Before she gets the courage to this, she debates with herself if it is really her place to speak:

...the new hospital! Couldn’t they take Amma there? There might be some doctors available. It was worth trying!

But just as she was about to speak, another thought made her hesitate. Surely her kind neighbors knew about the hospital…Why hadn’t he suggested it?… But, was it right for her, a mere girl to speak up and tell her elders what to do? Didn’t they know better than her? Amma groaned again. Madhuli shuddered at the sound. It was so agonised. No, she couldn’t stay silent, while Amma lay there suffering? She would have to speak up.

Her decision to speak up saves her grandmother’s life and she is much admired by adults for her ability. She gains recognition for it. This leads to her awareness that she can do things by herself.

She wouldn’t have to wait till Haria came. Madhuli could manage too!

These two stories come to an end with the two protagonists gaining self-confidence. We might say that the author intends her female readers to identify themselves with the protagonists. Could we say that the importance of children exercising their “voice” is the
main message being sent to the target readers? She is capable of speaking for herself. If she remains silent, their selves will be deep in shadow. Radha and Madhuli’s recognition of their own capable selves is an important step towards their self-confidence. Like Princess Aditi described above, Radha and Madhuli are good role models for female readers.

Another strong and determined girl appears in *Do You Want to Play Football?* This story deals with Monica, a female protagonist who wants to have a football team in her school. The principal rejects the idea because she thinks that football is not a sport for girls but for boys. The author deconstructs the traditional concept associating boys with football, and girls with skipping rope. As the story progresses, the protagonist accidentally catches a thief. After this incident, everyone admires her including the principal. The story comes to a happy ending and the principal reconsiders her decision. It is hinted in the story that Monica will have her football team soon. The story works against popular sexist ideas associating one or the other sex with certain prescribed activities.

Both the principal and the sport teacher in this story are female. In most children’s books these two characters are male. Although these principal figures are female, they are portrayed as strongly influenced by patriarchal ideology. For example, the principal rejects the idea of having a football team. I might say that the principal is a representative of a working woman who is imprisoned in a patriarchal ideology. However, the author at least tries to escape the stereotypical portrayal of principal figures found in most children’s books. Abolishing stereotypes in children’s literary texts is obviously not enough to eliminate them completely from children’s minds and behaviors, but it is a first and necessary step, if a writer’s aim is to build a new society in which the dignity of girls and women and their equality with boys and men are promoted and made an integral part of children’s ideas of right and wrong.\(^{32}\)

These selected short stories focus on self-confident, strong, and determined girls who recognize their own voices or their own selves. Their message is in line with the campaign generated by the Indian government with an aim to reject sexism with the motto, “A Happy Girl is the Future of our Country.”\(^{33}\) Likewise, the protagonists in these stories show what girls are capable of.
Questioning stereotypical gender roles

*Just a Train Ride Away* by Mini Shrinivasan tells the story of Santosh, a boy growing up with his single mother. His parents separated since he was four years old. Santosh’s mother is a capable scientist. This informs readers from the beginning of the story that women need not restrict themselves to the home but can be independent working women.

The mother in this story is not dependent on her husband or subordinate to her son’s needs. Women should not be seen as wives and mothers. Moreover, her career is one traditionally identified as a male occupation. It requires intelligence and a keen sense of competition. Such depiction shows the ability of a single woman who finds fulfillment outside of motherhood. It also helps people not to ignore the existence of single women.

Because Santosh has a super working mother, he imagines that his father, who is absent, must be even more brilliant than her.

He was a brilliant scientist, much, much more brilliant than Ma…

And Santosh knew, knew that Baba had left them because he was working on the most brilliant scientific discovery in the entire universe. What that discovery was, Santosh was a little hazy about. But something that would revolutionise human life, that much he knew.

How he knew all this he couldn’t say. But deep down in his heart, where dreams are churned out night and day, there lay, neatly framed, a picture of Baba the Scientist.

However, his real father is far different from his imagination:

Santosh thought about all the dreams he had about a rich and famous father, Baba the Scientist, the rich and famous man who would change his life. It seemed like a babyish fantasy, hardly made any sense now.

After he meets his father, he finds that he is just a poor lawyer, not ambitious or keen on his career advancement. This fantasy of Santosh may also deconstruct the mindset of many people who imprison themselves in the frame of stereotypical gender roles.

The author gives some information about the cause of the
divorce of Santosh’s parents. They have different attitudes. His mother is competitive and creative while his father is passive. These personality traits are used to question sex-based stereotypes. Moreover, it is the mother who makes a decision for divorce and wants to raise her son by herself. She rejects the role of dependent wife. She can earn a living for herself and her son. This contrasts with the image of the working mother damaging her offspring. Readers are given a chance to realize that success or failure in child-raising has more to do with individual factors than gender stereotypes. It is also apparent in the story that Santosh’s circumstances have worked on him in a positive way in that he is not a prisoner to gender stereotypes. He has a clear-eyed vision of the fact that real ability resides in the individual, regardless of gender. He can grow into manhood without following any traditional male role models.

In depicting Santosh’s mother the way she is, the author chooses to give us a romanticized picture of the single mother. Actually many single mothers in India have to face difficulties after their divorce. They have to deal with economic problems and child-rearing issues. And the wife asking for a divorce is rarely successful because the husband feels insulted by such a request and may reject her claim. Just a few husbands are open-minded towards this issue like Santosh’s father. It can be said that Santosh’s father is a romanticized picture of an ex-husband who respects the rights of woman. I use the word “romanticize” literally to denote Santosh’s ideal parents, rarely found in reality. Besides romanticizing Santosh’s parents, the author also romanticizes the character Santosh as an ideal boy.

This story comes to an end with the coming of age of the protagonist. He has undergone some changes. At the beginning of the story, Santosh imprisoned himself in stereotypical gender role. At that time he buried himself in self-pity about his life growing up with his single mother.

Santosh. His name meant “contentment.” But Santosh was not content. Far from it. In fact this handbag-cute kid business was only one in a series of recent incidents that had left his dignity in rags and tatters. Admitted, Ma was overworked and needed all the help he could give. Admitted. But did it have to involve, to name just two examples, carrying a broom home from the shop, and
hanging underclothes out to dry in the balcony where the girls in
the balcony opposite his could look and titter? Did it have to?

No, Santosh was not content.\(^{37}\)

After he travels to meet his father, he recognizes the potential of
his mother.

I’ve changed, he thought to himself. I think I understand things a
whole lot better now.\(^{38}\)

Santosh comes to free himself from gender-based roles. Now he
feels satisfied with his life.

Santosh understood his name now. He knew exactly what it
meant. Contentment.\(^{39}\)

His name is part of his identity. Accepting his name means
learning to recognize the power of his mother, a woman. In other
words, he is open-minded to eliminate sexism. He becomes
awakened and frees himself from stereotypical gender roles. Thus, it
can be concluded that Santosh is a role model for boy readers. If
boy readers learn to recognize the power of woman in the same way
Santosh does, they might grow up without bias against women.

**Conclusion**

Sexism has negative effects on both sexes although the damage
is more considerable for girls who are trapped in passive and
dependent roles. These selected literary works tackle issues of sexism
in two ways: rejecting stereotypical gender roles and introducing
self-confident female protagonists. To raise the issue of sexism in
Indian contemporary children’s literature cannot completely
eliminate the problem of sexism in India. Pat Pinsent once stated
that literature which “does portray females in a reasonably equal
way can help make females aware of their own potentialities, and
can prepare males in imaginative terms for their likely real adult
experience of having to cope with woman on equal terms.”\(^{40}\)

These works of children’s literature shows Indian authors creating new
images of female characters and describing evolution of gender
awareness in a male protagonist as one effective way to alter cultural
values in contemporary Indian society.
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Notes

2 See note 1.
3 Literally, patriarchy means rule by the male head of a social unit (a family or tribe, for example). The patriarch, typically a societal elder, has legitimate power over others in the social unit, including other (especially, younger) men, all women and children. However, since the early twentieth century, feminist writers have used the concept to refer to the social system of masculine domination over women. Patriarchy has been a fundamentally important concept in gender studies, leading to the development of a number of theories that aim to identify the bases of women’s subordination to men. See Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan, *Fifty Key Concepts in Gender Studies* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), p.93.
6 See note 5.
7 See note 5.
8 ‘India’s Problem of Female Abortion and Infanticide,’ www.culturejamforlife.com/article (accessed 20 April 2009).
13 Michel, *Down with Stereotypes!*, p. 48.
14 Michel, *Down with Stereotypes!*, p. 23.
15 “Gender” denotes the cultural constitution of femininity or masculinity, the notions concerning what is appropriate to either gender, and the ways in which these serve ideologically to maintain gendered identities. In much sociological and feminist thought, gender is defined against biological sex. It represents the socially acceptable, and socially acquired, forms of being either male or female. Gender might then include everything a person does, from the clothes s/he wears, to choices of leisure activity, and from career and education to tone of voice. See Julian Wolfreys, *Critical Keywords in Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 74.
16 An adequate understanding of a stereotype must also include the idea that stereotypes are not only contained within an individual’s mind, but also exist at a collective level. This shared element of the content of stereotypes makes it possible
to identify some easily recognized gender stereotypes—for example, that women are emotional and unpredictable, are bad drivers and like chocolate, or that men are rational and instrumental, bad at housework and like sport. With these points in mind, a gender stereotype can be defined as a standardized and often pejorative idea or image held about an individual on the basis of their gender. See Pilcher and Whelehan, *Fifty Key Concepts*, p. 167.

26 Recognizing the fact that it is the girl child who is compelled to leave school at an early age, special efforts are being made to increase enrollment and retention of these children in school. Combining a program of non-formal education for the working children and supported with a massive adult literacy effort, India is geared to meet the target of Education for All by the end of the current decade. See “Programs of Action” http://www.indianembassy.org/policy/Children_Women/policies_women.html (accessed 20 April 2009).
28 Agarwal, ‘Delivery Girl,’ p. 15.
29 Deepa Agarwal, ‘When Haria Comes...’ in *Not Just Girls*, p. 76.
31 Agarwal, ‘When Haria Comes,’ p. 85.
32 Michel, *Down with Stereotypes!*, p. 86.
33 ‘A Happy Girl is the Future of our Country’ has been a slogan of the Indian government since they started Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), a new education policy from 2001 onward.
34 Pinsent, *Children’s Literature*, p. 77.
36 Shrinivasan, *Just a Train Ride Away*, p. 52.
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39 Shrinivasan, *Just a Train Ride Away*, p. 56.
40 Pinsent, *Children’s Literature*, p. 77