

Children Literature by Women Writers and Gender Politics: A Discourse

Vakkala Uma¹, Dr. Varsha Saraswat²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, Mansarovar Global University, Sehore, Madhya Pradesh

²Supervisor, Department of English, Mansarovar Global University, Sehore, Madhya Pradesh

ABSTRACT

Women's writing has brought a new dimension to Indian literature. In the 20th century, it emerged as a powerful medium of modernism and feminist expression. Over the last two decades, Indian English literature has seen remarkable growth in feminist writings. The novels of Indian women writers address both contemporary issues and long-standing societal challenges faced by women. These writers explore feminine subjectivity, covering themes that range from childhood to womanhood. Traditionally, the work of Indian women writers has been undervalued due to patriarchal beliefs that prioritize male experiences. This bias stems partly from the perception that women's writing lacks a separate domestic space. Indian women's aspirations and expectations are shaped by the country's social and moral commitments. Additionally, Indian women writers in English face another form of prejudice compared to their regional counterparts. Since proficiency in English is often limited to the educated, affluent class, their works are sometimes considered disconnected from the broader realities of Indian life. Over the last four decades, the portrayal of women in literature has evolved significantly. Female writers have moved beyond the traditional depiction of self-sacrificing women to explore female characters engaged in identity struggles. Women are no longer simply defined by their victimhood; instead, modern literature focuses on their inner lives and complex interpersonal relationships. In a society where individualism and protest have often been discouraged, themes of marital happiness and a woman's role at home remain central. However, contemporary women's literature also reflects cultural displacement, presenting female characters who are more assertive, independent, and articulate than their predecessors. This study aims to analyze how gender is represented in children's literature and examine whether the unequal portrayal of women has changed over the past two decades.

Key words: Indian women writers, childhood to womanhood, patriarchal beliefs

INTRODUCTION

The modern era of Indian literature began in the late 19th century, influenced by Western feminism but taking its own unique path. The Indian feminist movement was shaped by the country's social and cultural context, contributing to the broader intellectual renaissance of the time. The majority of these novels depict the psychological suffering of the frustrated homemaker; this subject matter has often been considered superficial compared to the depiction of repressed and oppressed lives of women of the lower classes. Reformers in India believed that educating women was key to eliminating social evils, leading to significant progress in female literacy. Indian women writers played a crucial role in this transformation, using literature to express their deep-seated emotions and advocate for change.

Feminist movements have led to growing awareness of how women are portrayed in children's literature. Researchers have explored not only the frequency of female representation compared to male characters but also the roles they play, the messages their depictions convey, and how children interpret these portrayals. Historically, children's literature has been largely male-dominated. Stereotypes in children's literature extend beyond occupational roles to personality traits. It is obvious that male characters were primarily portrayed with traditionally masculine traits, whereas female characters were either androgynous or traditionally feminine. Notably, no male characters displayed androgynous traits. Fairy tales, in particular, emphasize female beauty, reinforcing the idea that a woman's most valuable asset is her physical appearance. Children literature stories that highlight feminine beauty are more likely to endure over time, reinforcing societal expectations about female attractiveness. *Bruno Bettelheim* explores the deeper meaning of fairy tales, explaining:

"Fairy tales teach little about the specific conditions of life in modern society, as they were created long before its existence. However, they reveal more about the inner struggles of human beings and the right ways to navigate challenges in any society than any other stories comprehensible to a child."

(Bettelheim, 2019)

Children's literature also shapes perceptions of parental roles. In children's literature, fathers are frequently depicted as uninvolved and emotionally distant, while mothers are nurturing and responsible for childcare. These portrayals reinforce traditional gender roles by suggesting that caregiving is inherently a woman's duty. Children's books play a crucial role in shaping societal norms, as they are often a child's first introduction to social structures. Traditionally, these books depict women in roles such as cooking, sewing, childcare, teaching, and nursing, while men are portrayed engaging in physical activities like racing and wrestling or working in high-status jobs such as doctors or engineers.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Fairy tales have a particularly strong influence on gender role perceptions. What a world of wonders it promises! Look up at the blue sky and the birds soaring high; look down at the clear, flowing streams. Gaze upon the lush green meadows, the charming brick houses, and take in the beauty of this blissful land. This is the land of fairies and beasts, of humans and animals, where the living and the inanimate coexist in harmony. Classic stories such as *Cinderella* and *Snow White* often depict women as passive figures waiting for male saviors; such narratives send problematic messages. The industrious girls are beautiful while lazy girls are unattractive. A woman's ultimate goal should be marriage that identified recurring themes in fairy tales that depict women as contributing little to only fort typical image of women. The German poet *Friedrich Schiller* once said:

"There is deeper meaning in the fairy tales told to me in childhood than in the truths taught by life."

(Schiller, 2019)

Through fairy tales, a child is exposed to various human challenges and learns how to navigate them, aiding in their mental and emotional development. Take, for example, *The Ugly Duckling*. Initially, the child feels sorrow for the duckling, who is shunned and considered unattractive. As the story unfolds, they learn that not everyone is born beautiful. They may feel anger at the duckling's mistreatment but by the end; share in its joy upon discovering its identity. The child absorbs an important lesson: physical appearance is not the right measure of a person's worth. Even if they do not fully comprehend the meaning at that moment, these lessons remain stored in their unconscious, shaping their understanding of the world as they grow.

RATIONAL OF THE STUDY

This study examines gender role stereotypes in children's literature through the lens of socialist feminism, which links women's oppression to capitalism, patriarchy, and the traditional family structure. While the focus is on female stereotypes, it is important to recognize that male characters are also subjected to rigid gender expectations. The persistence of traditional gender roles in children's literature reflects broader societal structures that perpetuate inequality. Feminism argues that gender oppression arises from both psychological and sociological factors. The portrayal of women as passive and limited in ambition reinforces their subordination in society. However, the inclusion of diverse female characters in literature can challenge these stereotypes and inspire young readers to envision greater possibilities for themselves. The lack of female characters in children's literature restricts children's ability to connect with their gender and understand their role in society.

Anuradha Sharma, a lecturer at *Navjivan Arts and Commerce College*, discusses this issue in her article "*The Ideology of the Panchatantra is biased*", arguing, "*Gender inequality in literature shapes children's cognitive development and perception of gender roles.*"

(Sharma, 2021)

The *Kathasaritsagara*, or *Ocean of the Streams of Stories*, is a Sanskrit collection of fairy tales and legends from the 11th century. Comprising 18 books and 124 chapters, it includes female characters and goddesses, yet the central narratives rarely focus on them. Moreover, the number of male characters significantly outnumbers female characters, reinforcing the trend of male-dominated storytelling in traditional Indian literature. It determines whether these historical patterns of gender representation have changed in contemporary Indian children's literature. It assess the progress made in achieving a more balanced portrayal of both genders. Over the past two decades, the representation of women in Indian children's literature has significantly evolved. More female writers are now offering fresh perspectives on female characters, moving away from traditional male-dominated narratives.

Panchatantra, an ancient Indian collection of stories, often portrays women as ignorant, silent, and deceitful. *Vishnu Sharma*, the author, assigns traits such as frailty, ignorance, weakness, and dependence to women, warning men not to trust them. The text suggests that while a woman's words may seem sweet, her heart harbors deception. *Panchatantra* reflects outdated views similar to those found in *Manu Smriti*, a Hindu legal code that promotes controversial teachings about women. It reinforces the idea that women should be obedient, self-sacrificing, and responsible for maintaining family and societal honor. Speaking up for themselves is often depicted as disrespectful or disobedient. Women in the text are subjected to various tests to prove their worth, and the introduction includes a particularly harsh critique of them.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Carole M. Kortenhaus and Jack Demarest (1993) the study scrutinized picture books from the 1940s to the 1980s and found that female representation increased over time, reaching gender parity by the 1980s. The study noted that female protagonists had become as common as male protagonists in modern children's books. However, disparities persist in parental roles. The result of the study found that fathers appeared in only 47% of scenes compared to mothers, indicating that female representation varies based on role portrayal. The portrayal of gender roles in children's literature has real-world implications. The study found that gender representation affects children's self-esteem.

Angela M. Gooden and Mark A. Gooden (2010) postulated based on their study that despite the increased visibility of female characters, their portrayal often remains rooted in traditional stereotypes. The study found that even children's books labeled as "*nonsexist*" continued to depict female characters engaged in stereotypically feminine activities. The study pointed out that adult female characters in children's books were mainly shown as mothers, aunts, or grandmothers, while men occupied diverse professions such as postal workers, farmers, business owners, and law enforcement officers. This imbalance limits the aspirations and perceived opportunities available to young female readers. Girls' self-esteem increased when they read stories featuring successful female protagonists, while boys' self-esteem improved when they read about successful male protagonists. This suggests that traditional gender roles in literature may limit young girls' aspirations while reinforcing the perception that only men can achieve significant accomplishments. The study reimagined fairy tales to feature women in empowering roles, such as warriors and independent thinkers. These revised narratives provide young readers with diverse role models, reflecting the growing movement toward gender equality in contemporary society.

Riya Aniruddh (2022) proposed based on their study that a child is brought when they are old enough to perceive and understand the world around them. Stepping into the world of fairy tales feels like an escape from reality, a journey into a land where joy and happiness abound. But take a closer look, and you'll see that fairyland is not free from the same struggles found in the real world. The powerful prey on the weak, the wicked witch traps helpless children, and the fearsome beast kidnaps the young princess, holding her captive on a remote island. Children are introduced to these tales to enrich their lives and offer them an alternate perspective on both human and non-human experiences. Through these stories, they begin to grasp the complexities of the world around them.

Gretchen Sankey (2023) The Canadian feminist in her study on the effects of fairy tales on children, points out that before the seventeenth century, childhood was not considered a significant stage of life. It was only with the rise of psychology that childhood came to be recognized as a crucial phase in human development. As a result, fairy tales, folktales, and myths became essential tools for teaching and shaping young minds. A young, uneducated child lives only in the present, with a vague and incomplete understanding of the future. They attempt to make sense of life, but their conscious experiences are too limited to fully grasp its meaning. When they read or listen to folk and fairy tales, these stories communicate profound messages to their unconscious mind.

5. Gender Representation in Indian Children's Literature

Gender is embedded in children's books through language, narrative structure, and character roles. A 1995 study revealed that male names appear twice as often as female names in children's literature. Even books with gender-neutral titles tend to focus on male characters. Female characters are typically portrayed as sweet, naive, conforming, and dependent, while male characters are depicted as strong, adventurous, independent, and capable. India has a vast and diverse collection of children's literature, drawing from ancient myths, folktales, fables, and legends. These narratives continue to influence modern children's books through retellings and adaptations in print and visual media.

Navin Menon, a leading scholar in Indian children's literature, notes in his article *Historical Survey of Children's Literature* that publishers frequently rely on traditional stories such as the *Panchatantra*, Indian epics, and classical folklore, which continue to dominate children's literature today. Despite India's linguistic diversity, children across the country are

culturally connected through widely recognized stories like the *Panchatantra*, *Mahabharata*, and *Ramayana*, which have been translated into multiple languages.

Everything we read shapes our perceptions, influencing how we see ourselves as girls and women or as boys and men. Children's literature, broadly defined, refers to literature written specifically for children. One of the most widely cited definitions comes from *Miles MacDowell* in her book *Fiction for Children and Adults: Some Essential Differences* (1973), where she describes children's literature as typically shorter, favoring action over passivity, and relying on dialogue and events rather than lengthy descriptions or introspection. These books usually feature child protagonists, follow conventional storytelling patterns, and convey clear moral lessons—elements that are often absent in adult literature. Additionally, they tend to be more optimistic, use child-friendly language, and have distinct, structured plots.

Children's books play a crucial role in shaping young readers' self-image and understanding of societal roles by transmitting cultural values. India often referred to as "*the cradle of children's literature*," has a rich storytelling tradition rooted in oral narratives such as the *Panchatantra*. This legacy as being "*just a grandmother away*," highlighting the close connection between Indian storytelling and intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Gender representation in children's literature is particularly significant because gender plays a fundamental role in shaping society. The stereotypical portrayals and the underrepresentation of female characters in children's books can negatively impact children's development. These depictions can shape career aspirations, influence perceptions of parental roles, and even affect personality traits. The lack of equal representation for female characters also influences how young girls relate to their gender and perceive their place in society. Such disparities in literature contribute to the early socialization of children, reinforcing traditional gender roles. Stereotypical gender portrayals in children's stories are widespread, with characters often assigned traits based on their gender. These stereotypes dictate characteristics such as physical appearance, abilities, attitudes, interests, and career aspirations. Children encounter these messages not only in school but also at home from an early age, which can restrict their sense of identity and potential. Although the number of female-led stories has increased, it has not yet reached parity with male-centered narratives. However, with the continued efforts of contemporary authors, the representation of women in children's literature is steadily improving. If this trend continues, we can expect a more balanced portrayal of male and female characters in the near future. The delayed emergence of these novels, especially in North America, may have other explanations. Literary critics suggest that before a new culture can produce literature, it requires a "long gestation period" in a new country. While Indian migration to the West has occurred for over a century, significant Indian communities have only developed in recent decades. It is now evident that contemporary English-language children's novels hold different positions in India and the diaspora, though both are largely didactic in nature. In India, these texts have evolved from a literary tradition rooted in ancient Sanskrit narratives, a rich oral storytelling heritage, and post-independence national ideals. They cater to a small, elite audience of urban, English-speaking, middle- and upper-class children. In contrast, the emergence of multicultural children's literature in the diaspora created space for these novels. A small group of authors within a parallel culture must carve out room for their voices within the dominant culture. These writers create stories to appeal to a diverse audience, including children of Indian descent and those from other cultural backgrounds.

This research highlights the persistence of female gender role stereotypes in children's literature, particularly in fairy tales and picture books. While female representation has increased over time, traditional themes continue to dominate, often portraying women as passive, nurturing, and primarily valued for their beauty. Such portrayals can shape young readers' self-esteem, aspirations, and perceptions of gender roles. Despite these challenges, recent efforts to introduce diverse female characters in children's literature offer a promising shift. It is essential to continue challenging outdated gender norms and expanding female representation to reflect the evolving realities of modern society. By doing so, we can help future generations develop a more inclusive and empowering understanding of gender roles. Both children and adults often struggle to distinguish stereotypes from reality. As society progresses, children's literature must evolve accordingly, providing young readers with a more accurate and equitable portrayal of gender roles.

CONCLUSION

The most significant change in children's literature is that women are now writing about women, rather than male authors portraying them through their own perspectives. This shift has led to more realistic and diverse female characters no longer confined to being passive, submissive, or uninspired. Instead, modern female protagonists are creative, strong, and independent. The conditions in which these texts are written, along with the influences that arise when Indian authors travel and migrate between countries, shape how themes of nation, cultural identity, and girlhood are portrayed in these works. Understanding the development and production of these novels offers a valuable foundation for deeper analysis. Equally important is recognizing the significant role of women writers in this literary tradition and their liberal feminist aspirations.

The idea that multicultural children's literature has provided a platform for diasporic Indian children's novels, demonstrating that their intended audience extends beyond Indian children in the West. Moreover, frequent explanations of cultural details within the narratives indicate that the books are intended for a diverse readership. However, South Asian children's literature, including the novels discussed here, has been slow to gain recognition in the West, particularly compared to other Asian children's literature.

Several factors may explain the late development of these novels. Literary critics suggest that before literature can flourish, a parallel culture must undergo a "*long gestation period*" in the new country. Although Indian migration to the West has been occurring for over a century, it is only in the past few decades that significant communities have formed. It is evident that contemporary English-language children's novels hold different positions in India and the diaspora, though both serve an educational purpose. In India, children's literature evolved from ancient Sanskrit narratives, a strong oral tradition, and post-Independence national aspirations, catering primarily to an elite audience of urban, English-speaking middle- and upper-class children.

In contrast, in the diaspora, the rise of multicultural children's literature created a space for these novels to emerge. The small number of authors producing these works belong to a parallel culture that must carve out space within the dominant literary landscape. They must shape their stories to appeal to a broad audience, including both children of the Indian diaspora and those from other cultural backgrounds. The unique conditions under which these books are written, as well as the influence of Indian authors who travel and migrate between countries, shape how themes of nation, cultural identity, and girlhood are portrayed in these texts. Understanding the development and production of these novels provides an essential foundation for further analysis. Additionally, recognizing the significant contributions of women writers to this literary tradition, along with their liberal feminist aspirations, is equally important, as the following discussion will explore.

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- [10] Nayanthara Seghal is also another writer who portrayed the image of women who suffered due to the sexist bias in the patriarchal society. Through her writings she envisions a world which is based on equality and the virtues of women to be equally valued as that of men.
- [11] Her Novel presents the image of Indian Womanhood. Women are the principle characters in her novels. She comments on the freedom of females. Her feminist voice is strong and louder which is the result of her unhappy married life.
- [12] Saghal's woman from *A Time to be Happy* (1957) to *Mistaken Identity* (1988) is all about the journey of women's struggle towards self-discovery. Motherhood is another category which has been critiqued and reviewed. Saghal's portrayal of motherhood is framed by a larger discourse. Her focus is more on women and value structures.
- [13] In *The God of small things* (1997), Arundathi Roy thinks beyond all the stereotypical characters of Women. The protagonist, Ammu –a mother of a son and a daughter – a divorcee is a rebel, who embarks on a journey with a man she loved - an untouchable thereby defies the planet altogether She seems to assert that women is an individual soul who is having a voice of their own.
- [14] She has the ability to shape her own destiny and is as capable as men. They are having their own identity and individuality.
- [15] Roy attacks the age old traditional norms and tried to exert feminism in her works. She focuses more on the social injustices against women and she had changed all the perception of women's identity in Indian society.

- [16] Arundathi Roy succeeded in bringing down the existing social order. Being an activist, she is constantly writing about social problems and the plight of woman.
- [17] Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), depicts women's issues and problems very deeply. She explores and interprets the emotional reactions and spiritual responses of the women and their predicament with sympathetic understanding and shows that women are not lesser than human; rather they are sometimes more dignified than men due to their greater human virtues, qualities and creativity.
- [18] They suffer heroically, though they are strong willed. A number of women sublimate their desires in religious faith. She describes that an Indian woman has to face between tradition and modernity.
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