

Study on Representation of Female Characters in Children literature in India

^aPooja Sree, ^bDiwakar Prahaladaiah

^aSt. Joseph's Evening College (Autonomous), Bengaluru, India

^bHOD-English, St. Joseph's Evening College, Autonomous, Bengaluru, India

Abstract

Studies have found that female characters in Children's books are ignored most of the times or always under represented thus creating a negative image about women. This paper examines the presence of gender bias in children's literature and explains the impact it can have on the young readers. This stereotyping would definitely affect the behavior pattern and the socialization of children. The study also finds whether this unequal and misrepresentation of women has changed after 2000. This paper samples 53 famous children books and analyses the shift in the representation of women and shows the impact of women writers writing about female characters for children, which has created a positive change and we can see that women are represented as brave, independent and creative rather than naive, dumb, dependant and venomous ultimately, making us clear that there is a positive shift in the stereotyping of women.

KEYWORDS: Children Literature, Stereotype, Socialization

Introduction

"Everything we read constructs us, makes us who we are, by presenting our image of ourselves as girls and women, as boys and men."¹

Children literature in simple words means literature for children. One of the widely referred definitions of children literature is by Miles MacDowell in her book, *Fiction for Children and Adults: Some Essential Differences* (1973) where she defines children's literature as "Children's books are generally shorter; they tend to favour an active rather than passive treatment, with dialogue and incidents rather than description and introspection; child protagonists are the rule; conventions are much used; the story develops within a clear-cut moral schematization which much adult fiction ignores; children's books tend to be optimistic rather than depressive; language is child-oriented; plots are of distinct order."²

The aim of this paper is to identify how the gender is present in Children's literature and to see whether the unequal representation of women in children's literature has changed in the last two decades.

Children's books plays an important role on passing on culture to the child, thus children's books serves as one of the significant factor to the image that children develop for themselves. India is often called as "the cradle of children's literature." It has its wonderful story telling tradition like many other ancient cultures. It is because of our rich oral tradition and Panchatantra. A.K. Ramanujan calls this, 'just a grandmother away.'

Gender representation is significant in different ways as gender is a big part of our society. According to Hamilton et al. (2006), "Stereotyped portrayals of the sexes and underrepresentation of female characters contribute negatively to children's development,

limit their career aspirations, frame their attitudes about their future roles as parents, and even influence their personality characteristics.”³ With the new support for LGBT issues, the lack of equal representation of female characters in children’s books limits the chance for girls to associate with their gender and demonstrate their place in the society. These unequal representations greatly influence the socialization of young children. Gender stereotypes can thus be defined as “assumptions made about the characteristics of each gender, such as physical appearance, physical abilities, attitudes, interests, or occupations”⁴ Children hear the stereotypes in stories not only in schools but also in homes from the day they were born. Therefore it limits boys and girls freedom to limit themselves.

In India, children’s literature has a rich heritage of ancient oral narratives like myths, folktales, fables and legends. And these books had continued to influence the present day books for children in the form of retellings and adaptations in the print and visual media. Navin Menon, one of the prominent scholars in the field of children’s literature in India, points out in his article, “Historical Survey of Children’s Literature” that “Every publisher looking for material to publish draws upon this unquestioned resource material so that the Indian epics, ancient lore, classical tales, folk tales, the Panchatantra form the bulk of children’s literature today.”⁵ Indian children despite having several first languages are culturally united and are familiar with narratives like Panchatantra, Mahabharata and Ramayana. These are translated into almost all Indian languages.

The questions that will be answered in this research paper are how is gender present in children’s literature in India? Has the depiction of women has changed after 2000?

Women were described by men from their point of view for a long time in literature. Kathasaritsagara by Somdeva, Hitopdesha by Narayan Pandit, Panchatantra by Vishnu Sharma are few examples.

Despite the increased range of career opportunities and lifestyles available to both sexes today, gender role stereotypes are still present and still produce negative connotations and consequences, especially for women. “One would assume that in the 21st century, females are no longer limited by their gender or steered into traditional roles due to a lack of options.”⁶

1. How Gender is present in children’s literature in India?

Gender exists in the children’s book in the form of explanation, diction and the content. It is also proven from a study in 1995 that reveals that male names are repeated twice than female names. Ironically, story of the books with neutral gender names revolve around male character. “Girls are usually represented as sweet, naive, conforming and dependant while boys are typically described as strong, adventurous, independent while boys are typically described as strong, adventurous, independent and capable.”⁷

The Kathasaritsagara, also known as the Ocean of the Streams of Stories was written in 11th century in Sanskrit. It has fairy tales and legends. The work consists of 18 books which comprises 124 chapters. Though these stories have female characters and Goddesses in it, the story does not revolve around them. Also the number of male characters outnumbers the female characters.

The lack of female characters in children's literature curtails the opportunity for the children to identify themselves with their gender and understand their position in the society. "This inequality of male and female roles influences the gender development and cognitive processes of our children."⁸

Anuradha Sharma, lecturer at Navjivan Arts and Commerce College in her article, "The Ideology of the Panchatantra is biased" says "In the Panchatantra women are depicted as ignorant, speechless, dumb as well as conspirators, and seductresses who do not follow ethics of life. Vishnu Sharma, personifies cleverness, frailty, ignorance, weakness, chastity, service, conspiracy and dependency in women. He teaches not to trust women. He keeps on infusing doubts about her in the hearts of man by saying that honey flows freely in her speech and there lurks deadly poison in her heart. Panchatantra follows Manu Smriti, a book of Hindu Law Code, now not in much use because of its controversial teachings about women. But Panchatantra teaches that the women should be perfect beings of sacrifice and role model. She is to listen every command with apt attention and does not have any right to speak because it will be impolite on her part and a kind of disobedience. Speaking for self does not suit her otherwise perfect sacrificial stature. She has to prove her love for the family and should carry the burden of community honor on her shoulders. She is constructed very vigilantly according to the male codes of the society. Panchatantra judges women through various modes and gives bizarre test to prove her womanhood. There is a long and sharply worded diatribe in its introduction against women in general in book I from the pages 138 to 146."⁹

These books emphasizes on messages for children about future mothers, submissive wives and pleasing mistress. It becomes an important forum for the children to know about the societal norms. As children's access to the real world experience, children books become a medium for them to know society functions. "The gender roles present for females include cooking, sewing, caring for infants, grocery shopping, being a teacher, and being a nurse. For males they include racing, wrestling, rescuing, being a doctor, and driving heavy equipment."¹⁰

I attended the Hopkins lecture at St Joseph's Evening College on 17 Nov 2018 on the topic "Children's literature in India, contesting sites of tradition and dissent by Dr Padma Baliga." In which "The idea of iconoclasm, tradition and dissent were discussed. What you read as a child stays with you. Children's books are used to propagate tradition. Tradition and dissent should exist together because both are important for children books."¹¹

2. Has the depiction of women changed after 2000?

The last two decades in India has seen a considerable change in the representation of women. We can see rise in new women writers emerging across the country. Women writing about women in short stories and novels portray a whole new picture that we have never heard of and read about. The best example is Sita's Ramayana by Samhita Arni published in 2011. This book shifts the point of view of Ramayana totally. It is narrated by Sita from her perspective.

In Excuse me, Is this India? by Anushka Ravishankar which was published in 2003, has a little girl's imagination of travel. The Aditi and her friends series by Sunita

Namjoshi is a series about Aditi, her friends and animals. The books recast characters from popular legends and questions popular notions about them.

Wisha Wozarriter by Kayal Kapadia tells the story of ten year old Wisha, who wishes to be a writer. She stops wishing and starts writing to be a writer.

“I wish I was a writer, Sighed Wisha

Well, you are Wisha Wozarriter, said the Bookworm

So I am! But I don’t quite know where to begin.

At the beginning, of course, said the Bookworm, rolling his eyes.”¹²

Mayil will not keep quiet by Niveditha Subramaniam and Sowmya Rajendran published in 2011 is a sensitive, honest, hilarious peek into the life and mind of an insightful young girl, Mayil, as seen through her diary jottings.

Though the under representation of woman has changed considerably, the representation of gender is not equalized yet. It is disheartening to find that only 10 out of 50 books has women as protagonists in a website that suggests “50 Indian books that every parent must read to their child”¹³

Conclusion

The study shows the most anticipated and wanted shift in the field of literature, i.e Women representing women in their works rather than men portraying women from their perspective. Thus, we get to know about the gender from the lenses of women. Portraying women as dull, subservient and unimaginative has changed with the rise in women writers. They portray women as creative, challenging and productive. The number of females in the central roles has increased to considerable amount. However, it is not equal as male characters. The effort of the authors in writing a realistic text for young readers is obvious these days especially in the books that are published after 2000. If this attitude and effort continues, we can expect the balance in representation of male and female characters in children’s books in near future.

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