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Redefining Gender Stereotypes: A Critical Study of Selected Indian English Children's Books by Women Authors

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Abstract

The gender acculturation of children begins very early in life, consciously, subconsciously and unconsciously. Children grow up imbibing and accepting fixed gendered notions about how boys and girls are supposed to think and behave. Growing up with such regressive ideas is unfair and limits a child's true abilities and freedom. Society reinforces these ideas through customs and social rules. Parents, friends and classmates play a big role in forming these early beliefs. Media and books also strengthen these stereotypes by repeatedly presenting similar patterns, such as boys being strong and girls being gentle. Over time, these repeated images negatively affect children's emotional and social growth and perpetuate inequality in society. Boys may feel pressured not to show their feelings, while girls may feel less confident about becoming leaders. However, contemporary Indian writers of English children's literature, especially women authors, are now challenging these stereotypes. They are writing stories with strong female protagonists who break traditional gender roles and choose their own paths. The present paper examines selected works of such Indian English women writers of children's literature. A qualitative analysis method is used to explore progressive feminist notions in themes, storytelling, character portrayal, and pictorial illustrations in their literary contributions, as well as their significant contribution to Indian English children's literature in shaping positive thinking and supporting a fairer and equitable society.

Keywords: Children's Literature, Indian English Women Writers, Gender Stereotypes, Independence, Empowerment, Identity Formation, Equality

Introduction

Childhood is a crucial stage of human life for emotional, moral, cognitive, and intellectual growth. Children's literature plays an important role in shaping and developing these areas. It goes beyond simple entertainment, acting as a powerful tool that shapes values, sharpens thinking, builds moral awareness, and strengthens emotional resilience for life. In the paper titled "Culture, Identity and Children's Literature", Stuart Marriott rightly observes:

> Children can only develop through their experience of the social and physical world and insofar as stories form part of that world they must surely play some part in the process of acculturation, And indeed there is some impressive evidence of a variety of types and styles that young readers" encounters with stories, both oral and written, many well be significant in the formation and maintenance of personal and social identity. (Marriott 9)

A study of the history of children's literature in India reveals a rich and enduring legacy of oral storytelling. This tradition primarily emphasized moral instruction and aimed at shaping proper conduct. Classical Sanskrit texts such as the *Panchatantra*, *Mahabharata*, and *Ramayana* have long served as powerful agents of socialisation for children. Even today, these epic narratives continue to be revisited, retold, and widely published in various Indian languages as well as in English, with thoughtful adaptations for young readers. They remain deeply influential in shaping the intellectual, social, and moral development of children. As Navin Menon too observes in his chapter titled " A Historical Survey":

> 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. (Menon 24)

During the colonial period, children's books were strongly influenced by British models. They frequently missed Indian themes, settings and characters. Gradually, Indian writers used English strategically and started creating stories and characters rooted in Indian social, cultural and spiritual identity, local culture, folklore, and traditions. One of the earliest contributors was Rabindranath Tagore, who wrote

imaginative and philosophical pieces for children like *The Crescent Moon, The Post Office* and *Kabuliwala*. Swarankumari Devi, one of the earliest Indian women writers in English and Bengali, brought Indian family life and cultural contexts into her *Stories for Children*. These works not only helped decolonize children's imagination but laid the groundwork for post-colonial indigenous writing for young readers. Post-independence, the production of children's literature gained momentum with a strong desire to produce literature that represented Indian identity and values. Publishing houses such as the Children's Book Trust and the National Book Trust, both established in 1957, played a pivotal role in promoting children's literature in English as well as regional languages. Together, they helped change children's literature in a big way. They made good books easier for more children to read and enjoy. At the same time, they opened the door for writers and illustrators to share stories that reflect their own cultures and traditions, making the field richer and more meaningful. The late 20th century saw a boom in publishing, especially with private publishers like Tulika Books, Pratham Books, Tara Books, and Katha Books. They produced meaningful, colourful, and diverse books for young readers, helping children understand and respect differences through simple and engaging stories. Commenting on the progressive vision of *Tulika* and *Tara*, Michelle Superle aptly remarks in his critical work titled *Contemporary English Language Indian's Children Literature*: *Representations of Nation, Culture, and the New Indian Girl*:

> … two houses that specialise in English- language children's literature have specific visions: Tulika aims to foster multicultural identity within India, as well as to portray realistic, rather than exotic, representations of the country, whereas Tara is committed to promoting positive textual representations of strong female characters. (Superle 25)

From a feminist perspective, the history of Indian English children's literature reflects the gradual shift from patriarchal narratives to egalitarian narratives. Publishers like the Children's Book Trust and the National Book Trust started opening the door to stories that didn't strictly follow these old patterns. Their books slowly began to show girls in more active and varied roles, even if the change wasn't always dramatic. The real turning point has come with independent publishing houses such as *Tulika, Pratham, Tara* and *Katha* which have made a conscious effort to rethink how children's stories were told. By gently questioning gender stereotypes

and making girls central protagonists instead of side characters, these stories not only entertain but also help children see a more inclusive world. In traditional Indian society, grandmothers are often the oral storytellers who propagate patriarchal ideology. In contrast, the contemporary Indian women authors, while continuing this storytelling tradition, challenge these norms by giving voice to the traditionally silenced members of society. As Superle rightly observes:

> Over the past few decades, Indian women authors have begun to create children's novels, which refute this pattern, in particular by positioning girls as capable of contributing to national goals. (Superle 38)

The Why Why Girl (2003); Author: Mahasweta Devi; Illustrator: Kanyika Kini; Publisher: Tulika Books

The story of Mahasweta Devil's first picture book centers on Moyna, a young and inquisitive Shabar tribal girl. Despite facing both social and gender-based marginalization, that ten year old poor but fearless girl defied those constructs and constantly questioned the world around her. When her mother, Khiri asked her to thank Babu, their landlord and master for giving them rice, she blatantly retorted:

> "Why should I?" Moyna said. "Don't I sweep the cowshed and do a thousand jobs for him? Does he ever thank me? Why should I?" (Mahasweta Devi)

She believed that Babu was doing them no favour. He merely provided rice in exchange for their services. The Shabars, a poor and landless tribal community, never complained, even when they were inadequately fed or forced to consume the leftovers of village landlords or babus. However, Moyna could not endure the social ostracisation faced by her community and raised her voice against such inequality. She asserted that they did not deserve such inhuman treatment and were entitled to live with dignity:

> "…Why can't we eat rice twice a day?"
> …"Why should I eat their leftovers?" she would
> say.

> "I will cook a delicious meal with green leaves and rice and crabs and chilli powder and eat with my family." (Mahasweta Devi)

Mahasweta Devi, the narrator, was associated with the Shabar Samiti, an organization dedicated to the upliftment of tribal communities. Unlike Moyna's mother and Malati, the Samiti teacher, she recognized and valued Moyna's inquisitive nature. In contrast, Moyna's mother, Khiri interpreted her questioning as stubbornness, while Malati perceived it as overbearing. These differing attitudes reveal how deeply patriarchal conditioning shapes their perspectives, where a girl's curiosity is often misread as defiance rather than encouraged as a strength. When Moyna refused to thank the Babu, this was how her mother reacted before the narrator:

> Khiri sighed and shook her head. " Never seen a child like this. All she keeps saying is'Why'…
> "I like her," I said.
> "But she's very obstinate," Khiri retorted.
> "Just won't give in." (Mahasweta Devi)

Despite coming from a poor and uneducated tribal background, Moyna possessed a sharp, inquisitive mind and an observant nature that drove her to seek answers to scientific questions. The pictorial illustrations reflect her probing mind. In one of the pictures, she has been shown as looking at the stars and asking the question:

> "Why do stars look so small if many of them are bigger than the sun?" (Mahasweta Devi)

When the narrator told her that books could provide those answers, she resolved to learn how to read. She became the first student to gain admission to the Samiti's school. The narrator concluded the story by sharing that Moyna later returned as a teacher in the same school, inspiring other children to nurture their curiosity and question the world around them. Her persistent habit of asking "why" proved contagious. Through Moyna's journey, the narrator reinforces the idea that education and empowerment are powerful tools for achieving freedom and liberation, especially for women:

> Moyna is 18 now. She teaches at the Samiti. If you pass by, you are sure to hear her impatient, demanding voice,"Don't be lazy. Ask me questions. Ask me why mosquitoes should be destroyed, why the pole star is always in the north sky."
>
> And the other children too are learning to ask
>
> 'why'. (Mahasweta Devi)

Wings to Fly (2015); Author: Soumya Rajendran; Illustrator: Arun Kaushik; Publisher: Tulika Books

This biography presents an inspiring journey of Malathi Krishnamurthy Holla, an accomplished para-athlete. Despite physical challenges, she has achieved great success through determination and hard work. In the eyes of the society, she is double marginalized, firstly for being female and secondly for being physically handicapped. The narrator told how an unfortunate fever landed her on a wheelchair. Defying all odds, her desire to run made her work on herself and she won many races in the para athlete category:

> The doctors did many operations on Malathi.
> To keep fit, they told her to exercise.
> To move her shoulders, move her arms, move
> her body.
> Malathi found that she liked doing this. She
> liked to exercise, she liked to play.
> She liked the medals, too, that she began to win.
> …
> She won two gold medals and two silver medals at the first national sportsmen for the disabled.
> That made her famous. She was in the
> newspaper. (Rajendran)

The pictorial illustrations show her with a happy and determined face. In one of the pictures, she is shown doing exercise by lifting the doctors as her dumbbells. There was an incident when she wanted to participate in a race event in Ahmedabad.

But there was no participation in the female category. She wanted to make her friends at her workplace feel proud of her. She decided to take part in the men's category:

> " I will race with men," she told the organizers. Malathi was sure she would win. (Rajendran)

The fellow racers were from the army. For a moment, she doubted her potential, owing to her comparative weak disposition. Unknowingly, she got affected by patriarchal constructs. She revived her spirits like a true fighter and decided to march ahead with her best performance. To her and everyone's amazement, she won the race. This incident is a big lesson and inspiration not only to her but all children, especially girls, to overcome obstacles and believe in their abilities:

> But when she went to the starting line, her heart
> began to thump wildly.
> She was going to race with men who had been
> in the army. They were so big, so strong.
> She shut her eyes. She was just going to do her best. She wasn't going to think about anything else.
> …Malathi wheeled as fast as she could.
> …When the race was over, Malathi wasn't the
> last one.
> She was the first!
> …The race taught Malathi something he never
> forgot. She could win as long as she tried.
> And Malathi's dreams became bigger.
> She was Malathi Holla, the girl who didn't need
> wings to fly. (Rajendran)

Amma's Toolkit (2018); Author: Nandini Nayar; Illustrator: Ashwini Hiremath; Publisher: Pratham Books

This children's story highlights confidence and independence through the character of Amma, the mother of Mini and Tara. When Amma reaches home, she

finds her daughters floating boats in the flooded street. When she asks the reason behind the flooded street in front of their house, she gets to know that one of the taps in their house was not working and her husband hit it hard to get water out of it. The pipe bursted and the entire house and even the street got flooded. Amma steps in calmly with her toolkit and takes charge of the situation. The pictorial illustration represents that as she repairs the pipe, her curious children accompany her, turning the moment into a learning experience:

> Amma opens her toolkit. There are many things on there- a hammer, a wrench, screwdrivers, and a tape.
>
> Amma twists and turns things. She knocks and mends. Finally there is silence. The rushing sound of water stops. (Nayar 11)

By showing a mother confidently handling a technical task, the story gently challenges stereotypes and inspires young girls to be curious, capable, and self-reliant. When Tara and Mini ask what she has brought for them from Nani's house, Amma answers that she has brought toolkits for them. When Tara asks what they can do with these kits, Amma, like a progressive mother, encourages them to use these tools to fix their bicycle and gushing water and assures them that one day they will be able to design a rocket:

> "What can we do with this?" Tara asks.
>
> "Anything," Amma smiles.
>
> "You can fix your bicycle, make a rocket fly or… stop the water rushing and gushing and flooding the street!" (Nayar 13)

This reflects that gender parity is taught since childhood through small and day to day experiences.

The Weightlifting Princess (2020); Author: Soumya Rajendran; Illustrator: Debasmita Dasgupta; Publisher: Pratham Books

The story follows Princess Nila, who prepares to compete in the famous weightlifting championship in her kingdom, The Surya Championship. It is her dream to participate and win this contest. The pictorial illustration of Princess Nila defies all stereotypical beauty standards associated with girls. She has a tanned muscular body. Her main concern is her weight—she needs to gain two kilos. This stands in stark contrast to the troubling reality of many girls who push themselves toward anaemia in pursuit of the so-called hourglass figure. The amazement of young readers doesn't end here. Unlike typical Indian mothers who are only bothered about their daughter's looks, Nila's mother helps her in gaining weight. For the Queen, her daughter's win matters the most. This is how the conversation between the two takes place:

> "How did practice go?" asks the Queen.
> "Fine," says Nila.
> "But I still have to put on two kilos!"
> The Queen gives her a boiled egg. "Eat well,"
> she says. "You'll get there." (Rajendran)

Her mother had been like Nila in her youth. Succumbing under societal pressures, she couldn't fulfill her aspiration to win the Championship. But she refuses to let anything stand in the way of her daughter's dreams:

> "May I have another boiled egg?" she asks the Queen. The Queen laughs.Many years ago, she had been like Nila– wanting to run,swim, ride horses and win the Championship. But that was a long, long time ago. (Rajendran)

Least bothered about the societal pressure of getting married to Prince Vikram, she has made up her mind to join the best sports school in Taibar since childhood:

> Nila knows that when she grows older, the King has plans of getting her married to Prince Vikram.
>
> But she has other plans. Nila wants to go to Taibar, the land of snow. It has the best sports school in the entire kingdom. (Rajendran)

She devotes herself to self-training. The pictorial illustration shows her golden brown skin colour and her happiness when her weight becomes 55 kilos which she expresses by flexing her muscles in front of the mirror, thus breaking the patriarchal standards of unattainable and oppressive feminine beauty norms:

She flexes her muscles.
She cannot stop smiling. " I have done it!"
(Rajendran)

What is more enthralling is that she is not the only female competitor. Along with male competitors, she finds the girl with the tight plait as one of her strongest opponents:

This year, the competition is tougher. Nila
marks out the strong weightlifter.
The boy with the yellow turban.
The girl with the tight plait.
And of course, Prince Vikram. (Rajendran)

The pictorial illustrations depict the girls giving tough competition to boys by lifting logs and rocks. The final round is between Nila and Prince Vikram. They have to lift the ancient iron throne. Nila is on the verge of giving up, but the thought of her dream to become like the greatest champion, Surya, and earn admission to the best sports school, reignites her determination. With renewed fire, she lifts the iron throne high into the air. This reflects the strength of a female's fierce determination. In the last round, she outshines Prince Vikram and wins the championship. When the King, her father with a typical patriarchal mentality congratulates her saying that she is fit to be a champion's wife now, this is how she answers back:

Princess Nila smiles. "No," she says.
"Now I am the champion." (Rajendran)

Conclusion

From a feminist perspective, an analysis of selected Indian English children's works by female writers substantiates that Indian English children's literature has

evolved from reinforcing traditional gender roles to actively questioning and challenging them, encouraging both girls and boys to imagine a more just and balanced society. Independent publishers such as Tulika and Pratham have consciously introduced female-centric stories in which the protagonists are adventurous, curious, and challenge long-standing stereotypes.

Characters like Moyna in *The Why Why Girl* teach children the importance of questioning injustice and seeking knowledge, regardless of gender or social background. *Wings to Fly* is an inspiring story that encourages all children, especially girls, to overcome physical challenges and pursue their dreams, despite societal assumptions about their limitations. *Amma's Toolkit* highlights how the values of women's empowerment and the right to dream can be passed from one generation to the next, while also showing that women are equally capable of handling technical tasks often reserved for men in a patriarchal system. Similarly, Princess Nila in *The Weightlifting Princess* challenges traditional ideas of femininity by embracing strength and ambition. She defines herself not as someone's future wife, but as a champion in her own right. Portrayed as strong, confident, and determined, Nila redefines beauty through her muscular, tanned body and resilient spirit, promoting body positivity and self-acceptance. Her story encourages young readers to follow their dreams without fear of societal judgment.

Overall, this study shows that Indian English children's literature is producing gender-sensitive narratives which not only entertain but also encourage young readers to think critically about inequality and injustice. From a feminist viewpoint, such literary efforts like the selected works act as both a form of resistance against patriarchy and a means of nurturing a generation that upholds gender equality.

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