



Gender in Indian Children's Literature

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India

This paper pertains to children's books written in English in India, which is one of the most vibrant areas in the field of Indian children's literature today. I would also like to provide, at the outset, a brief idea of the children's literature scenario in India because it is essential to understanding gender as a theme in Indian children's books.

Children's literature in India suffered, until very recently, from a major handicap, which was related to what is loosely termed 'Indian culture', for want of a better phrase. Books were expected to adhere to certain invisible guidelines. Didacticism and moralising were welcomed as a means to keep the young reader rooted in 'Indian' traditions. Publishers were wary of venturing outside the comfort zone of traditional tales (the epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and also the *Panchatantra*, considered the oldest collection of children's tales in the world but that essentially target adults). Broken families, divorce, child abuse, friendship with the opposite sex and similar issues were proscribed themes for children's books. Gender as an issue in children's books was not considered particularly significant until very recently – a natural consequence of the prevalent patriarchal and conservative social mindset.

Therefore, I believe that the question is not so much whether girls form a majority or minority in Indian children's literature today but more whether they are portrayed in non-stereotypical terms or whether gender issues are raised at all in any of the works in this genre. Hence, my paper deals with certain notable works that either strongly foreground girls or raise pertinent gender issues. This survey spans picture books, short stories and novels for children, and, while largely concentrating on contemporary works, also provides relevant examples from past decades that have formed welcome exceptions to the rule.

I would like to start with Mulk Raj Anand's *A Day in the Life of Maya of Mohenjo-daro*, a picture book published by the Children's Book Trust (CBT) in 1968 and which has been reprinted several times thereafter. The book talks about the Indus

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Valley civilization through the eyes of a little girl, Maya, a potter's daughter. The selection of Maya as the protagonist is significant, given the largely androcentric bias of any kind of history writing in India. There is another gender dimension to this work, which, however, is debatable from a historian's perspective. It has been pointed out that the illustrator, Pulak Biswas' portrayal of Maya as a dark, snub-nosed child is, in itself, a statement against the preference for fair skin in the Indian social ethos. However, given that the Indus Valley civilization witnessed an admixture of several racial strains, this would seem to be a rather dubious argument. Nevertheless, this book constitutes one of the first examples of a girl as the central character in a narrative.

The Why-Why Girl, a delightful picture book by Mahashveta Devi (Tulika, 2007), examines a rarely-explored segment of the social spectrum by getting into the mind of a young tribal girl, Moyna. Moyna is unlike any other member of her Shabar tribe chiefly due to her propensity to ask questions. She questions the vastness of the sky, the smallness of the stars, and each and every aspect of the world around her. Moyna even questions established gender roles (she wants to know, for instance, why the landowner's boys cannot graze the goats instead of her) and acquires an education by forcing the social worker to change the school timings so that she can finish with her other chores and then learn to read and write. She eventually becomes a schoolteacher who inspires students to question the world and its mysteries like her.

While we are in picture-book territory, I would like to draw your attention to another pertinent work, *Ashok's New Friends* by Deepa Agarwal (CBT, 1990), which won a competition organized by the publisher on the portrayal of boys and girls as equals. Ashok, in the short span of one afternoon, acquires two friends –Sheela, a girl who knows karate and calmly challenges a group of rowdy boys, and Rahul, her brother, who cooks meals for his family with great élan. This brief story manages to demolish several gender-related myths – that girls are timid and lack physical prowess while boys routinely stay away from the kitchen.

Another notable work by Agarwal is *Not Just Girls* (Rupa, 2004), which performs a deft balance between the urban and rural. Teenage girl protagonists from both sides of the divide are shown confronting, challenging and making sense of their worlds. So, on the one hand, there are city girls putting together a football team against all odds or managing alone in an unfriendly urban landscape while, on the other, there is



a girl from a mountain village who gets treatment for her ailing grandmother under difficult circumstances or another who is forced into a child marriage.

Let us now turn to two recent, significant works by Ranjit Lal. The first is *The Battle for No. 19* (Puffin, 2007), a searing portrayal of the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi that followed the assassination of the Indian prime minister, Indira Gandhi, in 1984. A group of schoolgirls, pitch-forked into mindless communal violence, seeks refuge in an abandoned house and fights to keep savage human marauders at bay. This gender-sensitive book maps the emotional journey of the girls, who must draw on unknown reserves of courage and ingenuity to survive, and of Puja, their leader, in particular. Puja, already deeply troubled by her uneasy relationship with her father, must battle fear, self-doubt and overwhelming odds in a personal Odyssey.

Equally noteworthy is Lal's *Faces in the Water* (Puffin, 2010) that deals with the issue of female infanticide. Fifteen-year-old Gurmi Diwanchand, the only son of very rich parents, discovers an unspeakable truth about his family –that his sisters (and female cousins) born before and after him were drowned in the family well at birth and that the extended Diwanchand family actually drinks the water from this well on a daily basis. The narrative proceeds in what might, at first, appear to be a slightly bizarre fashion, in that Gurmi gets to know all his sisters and cousins through a form of cyber magic, but it all comes together very convincingly in the end. Gurmi is torn between incredulity at this series of family murders and a desire to expose the crime, and an overwhelming sense of loss at his sisters' absence from his life. This poignant and sensitive novel ends with Gurmi attempting a form of redemption – he saves his new twin sisters from their family-prescribed fate. *Faces in the Water* powerfully drives home the Indian society's lust for male children and the price that girls have to pay, as a result.

Puffin India recently published two anthologies in the same year (2007) – *Favourite Stories for Girls* and *Favourite Stories for Boys*. As you can see, the pastel shades in the former supposedly appeal to girls and the darker shades in the latter to boys. There has been an attempt to avoid stereotypes in these stories, hence, for instance, in the collection for girls, they are shown facing dilemmas in sport, dabbling in detection and taking on giants. It is the collection for boys, though, that holds more interest for our purpose. There is not just a focus on male sensitivity (Ranjit Lal's



‘Owlet’) but also an interesting contribution by Paro Anand, ‘Bullies’, that talks of a pampered only son surrounded by unwanted sisters who are routinely forced to sacrifice their interests for him. Ironically, though, it is one of the sisters who rescues the boy from an ongoing dilemma of bullying at school.

There is another interesting story by Anand, ‘Babloo’s Bhabhi’, published in a collection of her stories, *I’m Not Butter Chicken* (IndiaInk, 2003). In this, Babloo, frustrated at the treatment meted out to his sister-in-law (*bhabhi*), a typically oppressed wife, takes on his older brother, Dinu, and physically restrains him from beating her up. He thus becomes ‘a man’.

The final work that I would like to share with you is my latest book, *Harsha Vardhana* (Scholastic, 2009). History remembers Harsha as the powerful king of Thanesar and Kanauj who ruled over almost all of north India in the 7th century AD. I have contested the usual gender-blind delineation of Harsha’s reign by focusing on his younger sister, Rajyashri, through whom he actually acquired the throne of Kanauj that set him on the path to paramouncy – a fact that is almost always eclipsed in textbooks and other historical accounts of the time.

I would like to conclude with an interesting observation. When one surveys children’s books written by Indians settled abroad and sometimes published by foreign publishing houses, one notices their routinely gender-sensitive themes: stories that are set in India but that invariably raise gender issues or that have very strong female protagonists. One can cite Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Victory Song* (Puffin, 2002), that deals with a young girl rescuing her father during the Independence movement in India, or Pratima Mitchell’s *Indian Summer* (Walker Books, 2009), that juxtaposes two girls from opposite ends of the social spectrum and examines opposing social attitudes towards them, in this regard. Is this because of the relatively unfettered publishing mores available to these writers abroad, is it more acceptable for non-resident Indians to be raising these issues in their books, or is it just a reflection of the growing interest in gender issues in Indian children’s literature on the whole?

