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Reification of Gender: Women in Indian Children's Fiction

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Abstract

In this research paper, it is discussed how the girls also faced 'interior colonization' from the patriarchy before independence. It is focused on the presentation of a new girl by a children novelist KashmiraSheth. Children's literature from India is not yet recognized around the world, but it is certainly spreading its wings. Writers of children's literature produce books, both traditional and contemporary, that reflect Indian reality in content, style, visuals and production. This paper focuses on the powerful and enchanting novel juxtaposes Leela's journey to self-determination with the parallel struggle of her family and community to follow Gandhi on the road to independence from British rule. The setting of the novel is before 1947 when India was struggling for independence from the colonizers. The girls like Leela fight against the traditional customs and inequality of gender and tries to get 'Purna Swaraj'. Gandhi's pursuit of freedom from colonial control is shown to inspire Leela's own pursuit of freedom from patriarchal constraints.

Keywords: reification, children, girls, identity, marriage, Karishma Sheth, Leela, Kupi, Suchitra

After a period of aggressive deficiencies which can break certain girls mentally that girls succeed in breaking constrains that are binding them and developing independent identities. Once they have done well in the quest and found their identity, they are at peace with themselves as well as with the world. They turn out to be individuals who have their own goals in life, making their own voices, with a sense of responsibility. They become freed in their actions and thinking, in contrast to their earlier lives, which were similar to the conventional concept of a woman that is docile, dependent, fearful, submissive, and suffering in silence.

Once freed, girls learn to live equal with men and develop qualities earlier connected with manliness like ambition, aggressiveness, broad mindedness, courage and independence. Through finding their identities requires a lot of mental agony and struggle. It is this agony for self- identity that turns out to be a text of most women writers. The quest for self- identity is an off recurring theme in the fiction of many women creative writers. This quest for identity is visible in their rebel against conventions and tradition, their efforts to develop a whole and harmonious self, their pains to develop their individualities, at both intellectual and emotional and levels and thus experience real happiness and peace in their lives. In modern India, one can come across certain courageous and intelligent girls who raise their voices against the patriarchal society. Such girls fight for their self-identity. They not only transform their lives, but also are helpful in transforming others' lives. They

involve actively in the national growth too. These are the girls who rejoice their journey from victimized to liberate.

In modern Indian children's literature, feminist ideology is evident in the pursuit of gender equality and the widespread presence of girl characters, with the result that "girls are central characters and initiate action are... a common feature" (Banerjee, 6). In traditional Indian stories, girl characters were either passive or absent, but over the couple of decades, Indian women writers have begun to create children's fictions which counter this pattern; in this sense, most of the fictions by women Indian children's writers can be measured a form of feminist children's literature. Though the work of feminist children's literature can be classified as one in which the central character 'triumphs' over 'gender-related conflicts' (Trites, 4), a common narrative pattern in many of these fictions, it can also be considered a form that is based on a feminist ideology espousing 'that all people should be treated equally, regardless of class, gender, race or religion' (Trites 2), a definition that makes some of the texts problematic.

Middle-class girls play the important role in these texts. They are empowered; illusory through the lens of liberal feminism, they act to reject or expand traditionally prescribed social responsibilities for Indian girls by insisting that boys and girls are equally respected members of society and deserve equal opportunities, particularly in connection to self-determination and education. Rejecting rigid traditional constructions of girls as dependent, passive, restricted to the domestic subject, and less valuable than boys, contemporary Indian women creative writers both celebrate girls and imagine girlhood as an empowered state by positioning girls as main to the narrative and by positioning women and girls as part of powerful interrelated webs of community and family relationships. These girl characters collectively succeed in achieving change by acting with agency to the lives of people for whom they care and progress their own lives, and/or the well-being of their communities. However, new social roles for Indian girls are also prescriptive, simply with different parameters. Modern Indian English women fictional writers show the dilemma of Indian girls who resist at various levels in their lives.

In Keeping Corner (2007), Karishma Sheth creates a 'new girl' who challenges the conventional boundaries of patriarchy by refusing traditional images of imbalanced opportunity. The protagonist Leela is compelled by traditional principle to 'keep corner' by remaining inside her home for a year after she becomes widowed at the age of twelve. Even after the year ends, her ensuing life, as dictated by ritual, will remain an isolated survival: she will be a social outsider and considered a burden for her family. But Karishma Sheth describes a positive resolution for Leela, who declines to be controlled by social restrictions on Hindu widows and protests against this unfair treatment. Instead of remaining dependent and housebound, Leela completes her education and persuades others to see women are capable of providing valuable contributions to society. Afterwards, she becomes an active member in Gandhi's freedom movement. She is the embodiment of the new Indian girl on the cusp of independence. She was engaged to Ramanlal at the age of 2 then married him at the age of 9. When the novel begins, she is about to leave her parents' house (at the age of 12) and go to live with her husband as per custom. She has never been interested in studies. She does not care for the hectic situation in India and Gandhiji's freedom struggle. She is very much a carefree and pleasure-loving girl who passionately looks forward to moving to her husband's house.

According to her, marriages is just about wearing new jewellery, wearing beautiful cloths, eating good food and have fun. But soon after her marriage, her husband dies, and she becomes a widow at the age of 12. After her husband's death, her life has changed. Instead of being shown with affection, she is forced to tonsure and give away her favourite bangles and saris. She is compelled to follow the customs of 'keeping corner' by remaining inside her home for a year. According to Indian tradition, the succeeding life of Leela will remain the same. Leela will be a social untouchable and considered a burden by her own parents and family. As Leela describes her teacher, "a year of keeping corner won't end. It will be as extended as a river" (*Keeping Corner,* 107).

Religious and social requirements that illogically order women's behaviour; she rails against her family, displeased with their flimsy persistence that this is only the way things have always been. While Leela primarily believes her social position is invariable due to her fate and the vicious strength of society versus her own impotence, then she understands that her actions can make a divergence in changing her life. By reading the newspaper daily and undertaking other reading for her schoolwork, she familiarizes with the philosophical values and protest work of activists, including Gandhi, who are leading the fight to liberate women in India - as well as India itself. In sequence, Leela then identifies that her individual actions can affect her entire society. With the help of her teacher and her brother, Leela not only acts with agency to fulfil her goals, but also realizes that she can amend Indian society.

Considerably, Leela does not induce of herself solely as an individual, but rather sees herself as related with a public whole once she begins to realize her position as part of the larger condition of widows in general, childhood widows and ultimately women's part in Indian society.

In Keeping Corner, Kashmira Sheth tries to portray a new Indian girl character through the character of Leela who is shaped by liberal feminist principles and successfully balance tradition and modernity; she honours tradition and customs by working from within its framework and improving family and society relationships; at the same time she holds modernity through her fight for gender equality, which she reaches by developing herself through education and by making worthy contributions to public, outside of the domestic life. After Leela's husband's death, when her relatives force her to behave according to strict Hindu behavioural codes, she begins to question tradition and customs and subsequently rejects it and asks, '[w]ho started this? And why? Can anyone benefit from it?' (*Keeping Corner*, 59). Ultimately, she decides she must try to oppose tradition: 'I realised that this was just a made-up norms, and something inside of me cracked. 'I don't want to follow this custom.'(59) She begins to revolt against the outmoded traditions that literally hold her as prisoner.

In Raddha Padmanabhan's *Suchitra and the Ragpicker,* the character Suchitra fulfils the heroic role of the new Indian girl by improving her society through empowering other girls by converting or overcoming those who oppose such progress. She not only participates in the project of transforming restriction to empowerment, but also initiates it.

In *Suchitra and the Ragpicker* the rescue motif comprises the central narrative. It is telling that Suchitra, a middle-class girl and the protagonist, is named in the title while the girl she purports

to save is known only by her social position. Suchitra becomes inspired to rescue a dirty ragpicker from her present-day suburb of New Delhi when she glances out her window to see the girl sifting through the garbage "with poetry in her movement and a spring in her step" (Suchitra and the Ragpicker 9). Kupi, the ragpicker girl, is described with the baffling combination of being 'so ragged and so dirty' and yet 'so cheerful' (SR 11).

Suchitra demands of her mother one good reason why she should not go to school like me and becomes compelled to help the girl even though "she hadn't the faintest idea what she was going to do" (13).

Suchitra begins to gain an understanding of the complexity of Kupi's situation when her teacher explains that: "[I]n a country like ours, many parents are so poor that they send their children to work" (18). She welcomes her teacher's suggestion to find a way to send Kupi to school. However, this solution is demonstrated to be overly simplistic when Suchitra learns that Kupi is both an orphan and a virtual slave to a local man who forces her to collect garbage and keeps the money she earns. It seems impossible for Kupi to become educated and begin the journey towards becoming a new Indian girl – clearly an intolerable situation.

As she strives to enact change, Suchitra encounters significant resistance to her new Indian girl value system. Her friends initially wonder at her beliefs: 'You sure have funny ideas, Suchi. I have often seen children rummage in these bins, too, but never really paid them any attention' (11) and her mother warn her not to 'get agitated' or to 'think of' Kupi (13). Later, though, her parents accept Suchitra's determination to help Kupi, and they begrudgingly support her: her mother both "admire[s] Suchitra and wonder[s] why Suchitra couldn't behave like an ordinary little girl" (31). Clearly, the new Indian girl in her transformative mode is a novelty, but also ultimately admirable: when "Suchitra's father later reluctantly admits that he is 'proud of her," (33). Her final point of resistance comes in the form of the man, who controls Kupi, whom she later learns kidnapped Kupi (and other children) in infancy. While she is unable to convert his belief system, Suchitra manages to overcome him, too, by enlisting the help of her friends and the police.

Despite its uplifting message, there are problematic stereotypes at play in Suchitra and the Ragpicker. Not only is Kupi a consistently passive, dependent girl, but also the class and caste rift between Suchitra and Kupi is broad, and it is clearly implied that Suchitra's subject position as a new Indian girl is valuable and right, while Kupi's, as a Third World girl, is marred. While as a new Indian girl Suchitra attempts to treat Kupi as an equal, it is always clear that they are not equal: Kupi is low-caste, and thus she is inferior. Equally disturbing is the fact that Kupi's physical attractiveness is the quality that initially compels Suchitra's attention. It is difficult to understand why Suchitra would be more inspired by a cheerful ragpicker child than a miserable, downtrodden one. It is also unlikely that a malnourished, abused child such as Kupi would move gracefully rather than with exhaustion. The poetry in Kupi's movements and her large-eyed face make her an exotic, stereotyped figure, and it is troubling that only her physical attractiveness marks her as valuable enough to help.

Thus, it is impossible to argue with the idea that all girls deserve to be educated; however, when middle-class girls are consistently portrayed as heroic saviours of low-caste girls, a skewed balance of power can result erasing the gender stereotypes.

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