

Portrayal of Women in High School English Literature: A Reflection of Society?

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Abstract: The paper addresses the stereotypical portrayal of women in a few contemporary High school English language textbooks prepared by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). The carefully selected literature in school textbooks from the vast body of world literature across time and genre is worthy to be analysed from different perspectives, especially as reading material that teaches both the language and values associated with literature; as for children it is not a mere reading, but an experience and exploration of the world depicted in the pages of a textbook and looking at the vast circulation of the textbook targeted to a huge population of school going children, makes it a public and governmental concern. The paper examines the role and place given to the women in the textbooks and finds that gender role socialisation is a prominent feature of the textbooks. Women's subordinate position is one of the characteristics with which the pupils have to identify with. This female stereotyping fails to address the changing status of women in today's society. The message given to women/girls needs to be negotiated from the sociological perspective of gender equality.

Keywords: English-literature, Socialisation, Gender-equality, Schooling, School-curriculum

Introduction

It is well known to all that the school serves as a site for shaping children's gender attitude. The curriculum, pedagogy and the overall school environment is a product of the society that is gendered. Noopur observes that the school textbooks perpetuate stereotypical images of women which have damaging effects on behavior and self-concept of young adolescent students. In the recent times there was an effort to revamp the school curriculum in a gender sensitive manner. Needless to say, this gender sensitive approach has been incorporated in most of the government policymaking and in development agenda a long time ago. The huge gender gap in educational access and outcome was a concern to deal with as a result of which The National Policy on Education 1986(NPE1986) proudly proclaimed its goal to raise the status of women through education by incorporating gender sensitive curriculum and by eliminating gender biases

from the textbooks. The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) were given instruction to prepare materials accordingly for the CBSE schools in India.

English Language and Literature as Textbook

School textbooks are an important database from where children learn what is referred to as knowledge and carry it forward to the later stage and to some extent to the next generation. Apart from constructing knowledge, the textbooks shape the mind of the young reader by influencing their attitude, beliefs and values towards different dynamics of society like gender relations, social hierarchies etc. These books are one of the ways that maintains and sustains these gender hierarchies in both overt and covert manner. Through the stereotypical portrayal of women in traditional sphere of work, through subtly gendered language and by under representing them in the text materials, the books are perpetuating gender inequality. This is more so in case of language textbooks, especially at higher classes as the language is learnt not only as a subject but also as a tool to appreciate literature. The study of literature in high school is important to enrich the faculty of learning by using imagination and creativity as a tool. Bohlin has rightly pointed out the influence of literature in an adult student's mind.

The study of literature provides students with an occasion for focused moral reflection and dialogue, an occasion to examine what informs the moral compass guiding fictional lives. Adolescents need a constructive context within which to talk about the lives of others. ...Literature provides a rich context within which student can reflect and then mentally rehearse how they might act in similar circumstances (30-43).

Literature is the reflection of life and society. Life lived in a particular time of history is captured through the imagination of the writer. Women novelist like Jane Austen portrayed the life of girls in the later eighteen century England where the expectation of the girls were to secure a 'livelihood' through marriage, as a result, one can find classics like *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, *Sense and Sensibility* etc. Daiches rightly points out that the world which her books present is essentially an eighteenth century world in its habits, tastes, and appearance (744).

But what is found to be true is what Tharu calls the universal values that had been already canonized as great works continue to be the works that upheld the values of Renaissance which are individualistic, protestant, bourgeois, white, male and these are reaffirmed and maintained in ex-colonial countries like India where main literature teaching is the English literature. Tharu finally opines that a student is carefully schooled into that alien culture that historically related to India along an axis of power (254-268). Most of the literature in the textbooks of English is from this great works of world literature that reflects a patriarchal power and male dominance that relegates women to an almost invisible level. As a result, the books contribute heavily towards gender role socialization. Whereas the great literary value of these texts cannot be undermined, the archaic portrayals of male and female need careful handling through the right kind of pedagogy bolstered by gender sensitive teachers.

The Present Scenario

A cursory look at the present educational scenario for girls and women shows that things have indeed improved for better, but not in a satisfactory manner. Access to education has been gained up to primary and middle school or probably high school level, but certainly not beyond that as there is huge gender inequality in terms of access to higher education, outcome of education and achievement. Women in the discipline of Science, and women in research and higher education are still very low compared to their male counterparts. Wolffensperge calls it a gender specific horizontal and vertical distribution that can be seen in both school and university system and explains it by referring to the Dutch statistics that shows two types of patterning. Girls and boys are found in different places within the educational system; they follow different routes after primary school. Another gender pattern can be found in levels of education: the higher the level, the more the proportion of girls lagging behind. In secondary school, however, differences in the performance of girls and boys in language and mathematics/physics increase with age. Thus the low numbers of female students enrolling in natural and technical sciences is not completely surprising. Within mainstream and vocational education, girls are distributed differently from boys (93-94).

There is quite some work which has attempted to find out gender bias in school textbooks, mostly initiated by the western second wave feminist. Content analysis approach was applied to find out a quantitative data of male and female representations in characters and images. But soon it was felt that it was not sufficient to interpret the gender relations in a text. The poststructuralist in late 1980 began to decipher the meaning embedded in the text, by focusing on language, metaphor, forms of relationship used in the text. But both the approaches tried to pinpoint the place and role given to girls/women in a particular text. There are several of these types of studies all over the world, but in Indian context gender inclusivity is a recent concept, recommended to include in the school curriculum by the National Policy on Education 1986. NPE 1986 puts special emphasis on education for women's equality "in order to neutralize the accumulated distortions of the past, there will be a well-conceived edge in favor of women" (GOI 8). In the last three decades, there have been a few similar kinds of studies that examine the status of women represented in the textbook, but that is not enough to make a considerable impact, probably because enough attention is not paid to what children read at school. However, there is no denying the fact that, children are the future generations of the country and it is everybody's concern to look at what they are exposed to in the name of knowledge in the school.

The Discussion/Issue

While learning to appreciate literature develops one's cognitive ability, the stereotypes and biases present in it puts a negative impact in the minds of the students. The society today is much more inclusive towards women. In government policies, the agenda for women development has given way for women empowerment. Same way the National curriculum framework of 2005 put a strong emphasis for equality of all. But the gap in rhetoric and reality is to be examined by looking at the textbooks. The present paper analyses a few contemporary English literature textbook for class VIII, IX and X from the point of view of gender equality. These books are prepared by the NCERT and the Central Board of Secondary Education following the guidelines of the NCF2005. The paper focuses to analyze the text in terms of

visibility given to girls and women by giving considerable space and voice in the pages of the books, instead of counting the numbers of male and female present in the pages.

The textbook in English for class VIII, titled as *Honeydew* published by the NCERT in February 2008, makes it clear in the 'Foreword' that the book is prepared by following the recommendation of the NCF2005. The first chapter is a prose lesson on a war story against the backdrop of Christmas, where 'Mrs Jim Macpherson's character is presented with her identity as a wife of a military officer Jim Macpherson. She keeps waiting for her husband to come back from war. As expressed in the deathbed her wish is to make a nice Christmas cake, marzipan as it is her husband's favorite cake. Apart from her, there is another women character that appears for a second in the story is a matron in the nursing home who takes care of her. While being a poignant piece of literature, the prose lesson portrays women in a much subordinated, domestic sphere where Mrs Macpherson has no wish of her own except to show her love and longing for her husband. In stark contrast to this, Jim Macpherson along with his friends enjoys all that is considered as man's privilege:

As I looked about me there were hundreds of Khaki and grey everywhere, all over no man's land, smoking, laughing, talking, drinking, eating. Hans Wolf and I shared what was left of your wonderful Christmas cake, Connie (NCERT 12).

While the men are busy playing football, singing Christmas carol and actively engaged in the war field, the two women are busy with their traditional job of caretakers. Another lesson called "Glimpses of the Past" serves a few pictorials of Indian history from 1757 to 1857. Interesting to note that a lesson based on facts from history has no pictorial representation of women folk except in two slides. Where have all the women disappeared, who at the service of the nation fought equally for the country's independence? Next in the line is an all-male exclusive lesson where the protagonist is a well-read man Bipin Babu whose passion is reading books. He is surrounded by a host of male professionals. Another lesson captures the adventurous spirit of Major Ahluwalia, a member of the first Successful Indian expedition to Mount Everest in 1965. Next prose lesson is an adventure of a father and son duo who venture out at the jungle while the mother is seen for a while serving coffee to all. Next lesson is in the form of an interview with the famous physicist Stephen Hawking. While this lesson throws considerable light on this great man's journey of life overcoming his physical disability, the lesson is conspicuous by absence of women characters. The next lesson contains a few extracts from Ruskin Bond's diary, and before beginning the lesson there is a short note that acknowledges the fact that The Diary of Ann Frank is one of the most famous diaries, but it is not included in the content. Last two prose lesson is about a boy Ernest's prophetic life. In the beginning of the story his mother is seen as a participant who tells her son a story passed on to her by her mother, rest of theory covering almost eight pages evolves without even the mention of her. In the whole textbook there is only one such lesson that features women and girls and their heroic deeds to alert people of approaching danger is the lesson named 'The Tsunami' and this lesson in the whole book seems to be not integrally attached. The effort to include women in the content comes out as a hard job for the textbook development committee.

The textbook called *Beehive* for class IX is no different. Attempt is made to include all genres of literary pieces like play, travelogue, Diary, biography which might be having high literary values but not at the cost of compromising gender equality as the book does not contain any women role model from Science or politics except a piece of writing on Sontosh Yadav who scaled the Mount Everest to be the youngest women in the world.; and an aspiring musician Evlyne Glennies who in spite of being deaf came to become an accomplished percussionist. On the other hand there are lessons from the life of Albert Einstein, APJ Abdul Kalam, Bismillah Khan, a travelogue to Kathmandu by Vikram Seth and an extract from Jerome K.Jerome's *Three men in a Boat* that can be said as all male exclusive lessons. Chapter three contains a story about a little girl who has undergone a transmutation of her feelings for her father from fear to understanding, may be a great literary piece, but not without the cost of being stereotypical in projecting male dominance over female:

“Kezia”, Mother would call to her, “if you’re a good girl you can come down and take off father’s boots”...

“Well Kezia, hurry up and pull of these boots and take them outside. Have you been a good girl today? (NCERT 32)

The textbook in English *The First Flight* for class X contains eleven prose lessons; one lesson is an extract from *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank that caters to a host of male and female characters. Rest of all the lessons is male oriented without any significant place given to women; there is no role model of successful women included in the text. Even though a few lessons are girl/woman oriented, the protagonists are shown to be not as courageously driven as boys in other lessons. A boy plays adventure sport in the sky with his Dakota airplane (“Two stories about Flying”), whereas for a country girl getting able to enjoy a bus ride to the nearby town is a kind of wish fulfillment of her life (“Madam Rides the Bus”). In the lesson called “The Hundred Dresses” there is a clear division of differential expectations from boys and girls within a class room setting, where girls have to design dresses and boys have to design motorboats. At a time where most of the fashion designers in the world are male, the reaction of the boys of the class is hard to accept:

The children burst into applause, and even the boys were glad to have a chance to stamp on the floor, put their fingers in their mouths and whistle, though they were not interested in dresses (NCERT 70).

The *Literature Reader* for class IX revised and published by The CBSE in 2009 has a similar story to tell. The first prose lesson shows how a little girl teaches her grandmother to read and writes to make her familiar with the world portrayed by books, another lesson in stark contrast to this, gives a pen picture of a ‘man who knew too much’ a man who is capable of removing any doubts within five minutes. There is another lesson that eulogies a prodigious son. There is a drama where Madam Juliette wants to sell her villa, but is duped by men many times. In the main course book, in the unit called adventure, a story of the first female pilot has been included and book proudly announces in the Foreword that this is in keeping with the resonance

in contemporary society. But what is written in big, bold font in the beginning of the lesson is discouraging to the students particularly to the girls who aspire to fly in the sky some day:

The world's most famous female aviator, Amelia Earhart, disappeared in 1937, as she attempted to become the first woman to fly around the world with her navigator, Fred Noonan. She was last heard of from about 100 miles from the tiny Pacific Howland Island on July 2, 1937 (CBSE 24).

What is more surprising is that the next lesson presents a story of a young boy and his successful ordeal in the ocean!

The *Literature Reader* for class X begins with a fiction called 'Two gentlemen of Verona' by A.J. Cronin. A sad and poignant story of two brothers helping their sister to recover from a deadly disease. Whereas a heart touching story of the hard realities of life, a stereotypical picture of the women in the hospital bed taken care by another female nurse mars the mood. The following lesson shows a few women characters in negative light. Mrs. Packletide wants to kill a tiger, not out of her adventures spirit, but out of her vanity to be famous! The *Main Course Book* offers to include a few successful women like Wangari Maathai, a few women astronaut with their courageous move in life, but to one's surprise, ridiculously in 'Travel and Tourism' section three pictures of women in welcoming gesture typically shows that hospitality is none other than a woman's job!

The analysis shows that the books are not able to portray the status of contemporary women in the society. Women have been shown as homemakers and caretakers, devoid of any adventurous spirit, creative pursuit and decision making. The women characters have not been given due place and space. Following the guidelines of the NCF2005, there is inclusion of societal concern on variety of contemporary issues like sensitizing for a sustainable environment, national integration in the book but it fails to reflect gender equality. There is an effort to do away with this kind of traditional bias, by including a few female oriented stories, but the process of integration does not seem to be a genuine effort to do so. The curriculum revision process needs to be more serious and ongoing to eliminate this type of biases. Effort from all educators, parents, academicians and policymakers is what the need of the hour, as in the name of selecting literature for the adolescent, the society cannot carry the burden of gender inequality in the form of this sex stereotypes.

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