PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN PRINT AND VISUAL MEDIA FOR CHILDREN IN INDIA

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Abstract

The portrayal of women and girls in the media for children and its role in modifying a child's social and cultural awareness is one of the highly discussed issues in the field of academics in recent years. The mass media in India, along with children's literature, has played an influential role in reinforcing gender stereotypes and patriarchal culture in children's mindset in India. The print and audio-visual media for children such as story books, magazines, comics as well as children's films, cartoon serials, video and mobile games shape a child's perception of social reality by continuous reception of false images and messages about women. The present research paper aims to scrutinize the role and representation of women in the print and audio-visual media for children in India to ensure that women should be portrayed in multiple positive roles rather than with stereotyped images.

Key words: portrayal of women, print and audio-visual media for children, magazines, comics, films, serials.

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

(Mem Fox, 1993)

The portrayal of women and girls in the media for children is one of the highly discussed issues in the field of academics in recent years. For the children who are in the formative years of their lives, careful selection of what they read and what they see is very important. Alongwith the stories for children, the mass media such as print and electronic media play an influential role in reinforcing gender stereotypes and patriarchal culture in the children's lives. The present research paper attempts to discuss the portrayal of women and ratio of female representation in various mass media for children in India. It argues that inspite of growing awareness about women's issues; there is a continuation of stereotyped projection and negligent number of representation of women in the children's mass media.

- **Women and Media**

Role of mass media in India has greater responsibility in binding the diverse complexities of Indian culture which treats women with secondary importance. The role of women in family life and society has undergone significant changes. As an educated and compatible modern citizen, today's woman has acquired a respectable place in society. However Indian media, especially children's media has been far away from portraying real reflection of real woman. The presence of women in media both in terms of numbers (in comparison with men) and their status (in terms of position they are portrayed) is shockingly unsatisfactory.

Women have been portrayed by media as men would like them to see- beautiful creatures, submissive mothers of their children, efficient house keepers, but nothing else. The positive sides of women's progress and their contribution for society's development have been rarely reflected in children's media in India.

- **Mass media for children in India**

The term media is widely used as a short hand for 'Mass Media'. As defined by Mustafa Siddiqui, "the media are those technological agencies which are engaged in the creation, selection, processing and distribution of messages among people". Mass media can play a significant role in shaping social values, attitudes, norms and behaviours of common people. Mass media in India comprises of the Print media and Electronic Media. Print media for children in India include the story books, comics and magazines published specifically for children from two to sixteen years. Parents rely upon them for being a major source of information as well as entertainment. Electronic, now digital media for children in India includes Children's films, Television serials, advertisements and video and mobile games.

- **Print media**

Portrayal of women in Indian story books for children:

India has been acknowledged as the fountainhead of storytelling since ancient times. We have a rich heritage of ancient oral narratives for children including stories from myths, legends and folktales which continue in modern period through print and visual media. However, most of this literature was written mainly by men from men's point of view, dominated by male-oriented themes, characters and views.

In traditional children's literature especially, gendered images ignore female altogether or portray males and females in stereotypical way. Children's mythological books in India include numerous stories of Vedic and Puranic gods and goddesses. Indian mythological tales are full of powerful gods such as Vishnu and his incarnations, Shiva, Indra, Agni ; and a few insignificant goddesses with only exception of goddess like Parvati with various incarnations as Durga or Kali.

Apart from traditional mythological stories, legends and folk tales also have prominent place in children's literature scenario in India. The term legend, today, is applied to the hero tales; to the stories about humans with super-human powers, like Hanuman; great physical strength like Bhim or greater mental abilities, like Birbal, Tenali Raman, Vikram in Vikram and Vetal, etc.. Although heroes in the traditional Indian Legends are rarely female, women have influential and supporting roles, for example, Ram and Sita, Krishna and Radha, Satyavan and Savitri, Nal- Damayanti, Kacha and Devyani, Dushyant and Shakuntala etc. However, one can notice in these legendary pairs names of the male-counterparts of these brave and intelligent women come before them suggesting secondary position of women in Indian society.

Like myths and legends, fables and folktales consist major part of children's literature in India; most popular of them are Panchatantra, Katha Sarit Sagar, Hitopdesh and Jataka Tales etc.

Panchatantra is known as 'Nitishashtra' which teaches children the ways of life. However, one can observe that the conversations make unnecessary comments on women. For example, there is a comment like- "never put your trust in creatures with horns or claws, men who bear arms, women and flowing streams'.(*Panchatantra*, Introduction Xli). Also, no conversation ever takes place among female characters to demonstrate their knowledge. Only male characters are made to converse about all the wisdom and lessons of morality. Thus, in traditional children's literature women have been often projected as a passive character in the writings of men by men.

However, new realistic themes are being explored where there is hope for women to get their rightful place. Most renowned publishing houses for children's literature in modern India are National Book Trust, Children's Book Trust, Tulika, Katha, Pratham, Zubaan are coming up with more gender neutral stories in their story books for children.

Portrayal of women in Indian comic books for children:

When the comic books are examined for the women portrayal, one can find gender bias and gender discrimination against women in most of them. The comic books in India were first published in 1960s with the intention of educating the children. These earlier comic books were based on historical and mythological themes; they were retellings of ancient and contemporary history. These comics were primary medium of entertainment for children with parent's approval. The most popular and pioneering comics in this era were Amar Chitra Katha (ACK).

These comics were followed by action-adventure genre, influenced by western superhero comic in the 1970s. In the following era, comics include various genres such as – horror, superhero, mystery, humour, fantasy and science fiction. Most popular comics in this era are Dimond comics who introduced the readers with never-forgetting characters like Pinki, Srimatijee, Billoo, Sabu and legendary Chacha Chaudhary.

Most of the comics published in the beginning were ruled by male heroes. Women were given less important or secondary role in characterization. All wit and power were showcased through the male characters like Chacha Chaudhary, Bahadur, Nagraj, Super Commando Dhruv etc. It was the responsibility of these heroes to resolve the conflicts and bring an end to the evil in the story. The few women characters present in these comics such as Shrimatijee, Channi Chachi, Bini(wife of Chacha Chaudhari) were supporting

characters. These female characters are mostly housewives depended on their husbands. They just discuss the issues related to household and neighbourhood.

There was a positive change in the portrayal of women in 1990s Indian comic scene. More women characters were created with less stereotypical portrayal as a result of western influence. For example, Raj comic's Shakti is a symbol of women power. She is an incarnation of Goddess Kali and has emerged out to fight unruly practices of men over women. "Women characters in early 21st century have important and central position in comics. They act as symbols for power (Shakti), vengeance (Catwoman), rebel (Natasha), intellect (Chandika), bravery (Devi), beauty (Saudangini)", comments, Mustafa Siddiqui in *Portrayal of Women in Indian Comics*.

Another side of these powerful women in comics is their highly unrealistic portrayal in illustrations. Illustrations are derogatively revealing, unrealistic for real women. They present the gender bias of male producers of these comics.

The most popular comics, Amar Chitra Katha is the most often criticised one. According to book critic Nilanjana Roy, the ACK series reflect 'the stereotypes and prejudices of modern mainstream Indian culture: pink-skinned, fair heroes and heroines, dark asuras and villains, passive women drawn as in Indian calendar art from the male perspective.

If we see the following list of popular Indian comics, it is clearly visible how women are underrepresented in this filed. List of the popular Indian comics include : Amar Chitra Katha: Fables & Folktales (e.g. *Panchatantra*); Mythology (e.g. *The Ramayana*); The Epics (e.g. *The Mahabharata)*; Humour & wit (e.g. *Birbal*); Biographies (e.g. *Mahatma Gandhi*); Literary Classics; Dimond Comics: *Chacha Chaudhary, Billoo, Pinki, Raman,Shrimatijee, Daabu, Channi Chachi,* Foreign characters (licensed): *Phantom, Mandrake, James Bond, He-man, Spiderman, Superman, Batman*; Raj Comics: *Nagraj, Super Commando Dhruva, Bhokal, Doga, Parmanu, Shakti, Inspector Steel, Anthony and Tiranga.*

Portrayal of women in Indian Magazines for children:

Same is the scenario in children's magazines. Children's magazines offer short sized articles with lots of pictures and aren't as intimidating as books for beginner readers. Most of the stories in these magazines aim at moral value teaching to the children. However one can easily find stereotyped portrayals of female characters- as girls being cute and mothers being care takers only. Also there is less number of stories portraying girls as protagonists.

List of some of the popular Indian magazines for children:

Chandamama, the oldest brand in the field, is classic Indian magazine for children, famous for its illustrations. It is known for long running mythological or magical stories that run for years.It continues to carry old favourites like Vikram-Vetal, Singhasan Battisi, and mythological tales. However, the portrayal of women characters like goddesses and apsaras sketched in Chandamama are often criticized for being too sensuous for children.

Champak is a popular monthly magazine for children published by the Delhi Press Group since 1968 in India. It contains modern stories for children with a moral tone, comic strips, puzzles, brain teasers and jokes that set the child's imagination free. However, the stories in Champak revolve mostly around the 'male' animal characters.

Tinkle magazine contains comics, stories, puzzles, quizzes, contests and other features targeted at school children. Characters like Suppandi and Shikari Shambu that appeared first in the pages of the magazine have nationwide recognition. Currently on Tinkle, there is a series of stories about a girl protagonist in the crowd of male heroes. The series is called 'Super Weirdos' in which the girl, Aisha, is always trying to find her superpowers.

- **Electronic Media**:

Portrayal of Women in children's films:

Films are one of the most popular visual media of entertainment. Unfortunately, the commercial film industry, including children's films, cares a little about the image of women they portray. In a journey of 100 years, Indian Cinema has come a long way, in the production of children's movies also. Children's Film Society, India (CFSI), an autonomous body under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting functioning since1957, aims to promote quality content for children- from feature films, short films, animation to Television episodes and documentaries, CFSI promotes films that provide healthy and wholesome entertainment for children to broaden their perspective and encourage them to reflect on the world around them. With almost 250 films in ten different languages, CFSI remains the prime producer of children's films in South Asia. Some of the remarkable girl oriented films by CFSI are Ladli, Mehek Mirza, Ranu, Surabhi, Ayesha, Savitri, Malli etc. Ironically, none of these films have been popular as it has failed in reaching to the large audience. These films could not make place in the main stream or most watched children's film list.

Scenario of Indian children's films is dominated by superhero movies or boy centred movies reinforcing male superiorism in children's media. From Chota Chetan to Krish; Mr. India to Zokomon; Toonpoor ka Superhero to Ashoka, The Hero, Chota Bhim to Mighty Raju; My Friend Ganesha to Krishna, Hanuman or Ghatotkach; Indian children's movie world is dominated by 'boy' heroes with total lack of 'girl' protagonists. Alonwith these Indian movies, the most popular western movies for children- both commercial as well as animated- are easily available and popular with Indian children. The list includes- Disney Princess Movies like Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast, Snow white and Seven Dwarves, Aladdin and Jasmine, Little Mermaid, Pocahontas, The Princess and the Frog, Frozen etc. From phenomenal Harry Potter to Karate kid and Adventures of Tintin, the classic animated movies about superheroes like Superman, Spiderman, Batman, Ironman, He-man influence the young minds about the false images of their personality.

It is clearly visible that female protagonists are predominantly under-represented in children's movies. Also, they are often criticized for stereotypical or derogatory portrayal of female characters in them. Especially Disney princess movies which are most popular with urban girls in India, though they feature a central role in the movies, the princesses have been condemned to portray some stereotypical depictions of their gender. These princesses are projected as glamorous dolls whose physical beauty is their only asset. The sacrificing role of women is highlighted as it possesses no threat to the patriarchal structure. The prevalence of domestic work is an important theme in the Disney princess movies; for example, in Cinderella, the princess did domestic work as an act of submission. The men in princess movies never did domestic work. In 'Snow white and Seven Dwarves', Snow Whit cooks and cleans the house of Dwarves to stay with them. In recent movie, The Princess and the Frog, the Princess was portrayed as very good cook and good waitress.

In some of the Disney films, mother, especially step mother is portrayed in a horrible fashion but there is always a positive portrayal of a fatherly male figure. For example, Aladdin and Jasmine don't have mothers, but Aladdin has Genie and Jasmine has a doting father; Belle in the Beauty and the Beast as well as Aerial in the Little Mermaid is raised by their fathers. Also, even if the princess is playing the central role in the story, she still needs a prince to perform final rescue as in Cinderella, Snow White etc. It is disheartening that when there is abundance of male positive models for boys, there is an extreme lack of positive female role model for girls in the films for children.

Portrayal of Women in children's Television serials:

Television in India has gained superiority over other media for children's entertainment purpose. Channels dedicated to children's programmes have mushroomed in recent years. For example Cartoon Network, pogo, Disney, Nickelodeon, Hungama. "This 'idiot box' has changed into 'magic box' which influences our ways of life so powerfully that what we see on it, we believe it to be true", comments Hiren Trivedi in *Media and Depiction of women in The Society.*

Again if we go through the list of some of the serials available for children in India is, it is clearly visible how women are underrepresented in cartoon serials for children in India:

Indian Serials: *Chota Bhim, Krishna, Hanuman, Roll No.21-Krishna, Balveer, Jungle Book, Karadi Tales* etc.

Non-Indian Serials: *Doremon and Nobita, Ninja Hatori, Perman, Pokemon, Shinchan, Hagemaroo, Tom and Jerry, Mickey Mouse, Ben 10, Richie Rich, Handy Manney, Power puff Girls* etc.

It is clearly seen that everywhere entertainment industry for children is crowded by boys. Apart from power-puff girls, there is not a single girl superhero in cartoon serials. Also, the girl characters in all these hero based serials play only secondary roles or passive and helpless confidant of heroes who always need their support. For example, Bhim in Chota Bhim is always there to perform all the brainy as well as physical action whereas Chutki is there to just feed him laddooes. Fairies in Balveer always need his help even though they themselves have magical powers. Nobita wants to impress Shizuka with the help of Doremon's gazzetts whereas the large-eyed 'beautiful she cat' in evergreen Tom and Jerry is shown mute as looking beautiful is her only asset. The list is never ending about the derogative representation of female characters in the television serials for children in India.

Portrayal of women in the commercial advertisements on television:

As far as showing women in advertisements is concerned, things seem to have only worsened over the time. In most of the advertisements on television, a woman is shown washing clothes and utensils, cleaning floors, or serving to family members. These advertisements project 'good mothers' who feed their children with health drinks and instant noodles; 'ideal wives' who cares about their husband's shirts and cholesterols; little

girls who say they choose certain soap so that it makes them as beautiful as their mother. These damaging women images have great impact on impressionable minds of children who might compare their mothers with these false images.

Portrayal of women in the video and mobile games for children:

One of the most addictive and influential media of entertainment for today's children are video and mobile games. Game world in India is filled with western games as there are a very few Indian companies who create the games. Unfortunately, the presently available video and mobile games differs children according to their gender. It is commonly found that certain adventurous and aggressive games featuring male heroes are most popular with boys while mild and homebound games are for girls, propagating traditional stereotypical roles of both the genders. A strong gender bias comes in the forefront shockingly if we scan the list of some of the video and mobile games available for Indian children:

Games for boys: *Street Fighter 2, Super Mario World, Prince of Persia, Disney Aladdin, Road Rash-cars and bike races, Dave, Doom, Woolfenstein 3D*.

Games for girls: *Dress up Barbie/Stella and similar games, Cooking games, Games related to beauty and fashion.*

- **Conclusion**

The portrayal of women and girls in the media for children and its role in modifying a child's social and cultural awareness is one of the crucial issues of concern in the field of social studies. The print and electronic media for children including story books, comics and magazines as well as children's films, cartoon serials, advertisements, video and mobile games shape a child's perception about false images of women portrayed in them.

Considering the impact that gender representation in children's literature has on the self-esteem of children, as well as the role it plays in indicating the status of women in society, there is an ardent need to scrutinize books, films, serials and other media for children to ensure that women should not be portrayed in derogatory or stereotypes images. Instead of presenting girls and women in inferior or negatively stereotyped way, media should portray women in multiple positive roles and as a real character.

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