



**“Herstory” in Twenty-First
Century Indian English Children’s
Literature: Subverting Gender
Binaries in *Mayil Will Not Be
Quiet!* and *Queen of Ice***

Anurima Chanda

Ashoka University, Haryana, India

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Abstract

In the last two decades, there has been a new turn in Indian English children's literature that seeks to move beyond a didactic and moralistic setup within a homogenised culture to a more plural context where marginal voices can be represented sensitively without being sensationalised. Within this articulation, conventional gender roles have been challenged targeting female characters who resist simplistic gender binaries. Through a close reading of two texts – *Mayil Will Not Be Quiet!* (2011) and *Queen of Ice* (2014) – this article attempts to explore this shift in twenty-first century Indian English children's literature. It will argue that by privileging the very voices that were excluded from previous Indian English children's literature, these texts subvert the traditional gender roles and expectations that have remained such a dominant feature of this genre.

Keywords: Indian English literature, children's literature, gender, inclusivity, taboo

Introduction

In a society in which the child is seen in conjunction with the “mother” (Kakar 103), in which children's tales are considered to be “only a *grandmother* away” (my emphasis, Ramanujan 8), and in which the majority of the writers writing children's texts are “women” (Sunder Rajan 102), it is lamentable that there are only very few Indian English children's texts that have been truly representative of the female situation in India. As the history of the development of this genre in India will show, the concept of “girlhood” had been a largely non-existent idea in India for a very long time and there has been very little progress even today. However, in the last decade, there has been a radical change in the attitude towards literature for children. With the emergence of several independent publishing houses, there has been a new turn within Indian English children's literature to embrace a more pluralised articulation where marginal voices, including those of girls, are finding representation, and though not all of these representations have been radical in their approach, it is a trend being noticed for the first time in the country.

This essay will explore this shift within twenty-first century Indian English-language children's literature. The first section will discuss the development of the Indian concepts of childhood and their impact on Indian English children's literature, with special emphasis on gender. I will then focus on twenty-first century texts that are aimed at opening up spaces and giving representation to the multiple voices of multicultural India, especially with regard to the female child. I will argue that, while their success quotient is still highly debatable, what this trend has certainly achieved is an opening of contested spaces within children's literature. Within this space, one has found more scope for critical engagement with gender rather than the traditional silent acceptance of the insidious conditioning of young minds as embedded in the majority of texts in this genre, which have led to children in India internalising the strict tenets of sexism. I will argue this through a close reading of two twenty-first century Indian English children's texts, namely Niveditha Subramaniam and Sowmya Rajendran's *Mayil*

Will Not Be Quiet! (2011) and Devika Rangachari's *Queen of Ice* (2014), the former targetted at middle grade readers and the latter at young adults, in the final section of the essay.

Tracing the Understanding of Female Childhood in the Indian Context

It was from the West that the concept of children's literature as a separate discipline first entered India as part of its colonial legacy (Jafa 34). Prior to that the child was not seen as a separate category in the country. Sudhir Kakar's *Inner World: A Psycho-analytical Study of Childhood and Society in India* (1981), an exhaustive attempt to "systematically identify a cultural awareness of the child" by looking at the "views of children expressed and reflected in various parts of the Indian cultural tradition" in order to explore the "traditional conceptions of the nature of children and childhood in India" (Kakar 190-191), provides support to this claim. In the study, Kakar focuses upon passages from ancient law books, books on traditional Indian medicine, the epics, and ancient and medieval literature that deal with children in order to draw his inferences. He admits, however, in the disclaimer to his book, that "large parts of the Indian tradition of childhood are solely concerned with boys and ignore, if not dispossess, girls of their childhood" (Kakar 191) and thus the selective depiction and analysis of childhood that emerges is that of a high-caste Hindu male individual.

Further corroborating the fact that such interpretations have been gender-biased, Nilanjana Gupta and Rimi B. Chatterjee note in the introductory chapter of *Reading Children: Essays on Children's Literature* (2009): "For girl-children especially [...] the whole idea of childhood [was] a cruel joke [...] no one had any clear idea of the difference between a girl and a woman, or indeed if there was a difference" (9). Since, in traditional Indian society, there was no girlhood in the strict sense, there could be no child readers who were girls. Referring to the status of women as readers within the Indian family set up, Gupta and Chatterjee further observe:

Even in the richest households she would be expected to work as soon as she could speak and carry out simple tasks, a servitude that lasted until death. The taboo against reading and writing for women in orthodox households was maintained by superstitions, such as the belief that a literate woman's husband would die leaving her a widow... In social groups of less status, the moral prohibition against women's reading was less effective than the material scarcity of resources, all of which were invested in young males who were regarded as future breadwinners and saviours of the family. (10)

Such restrictions hampered the level of literacy for females to a great extent in that, while boys went to schools, girls were supposed to stay home and attend to the domestic chores. Thus, immediately after independence, when Indian English children's publishing entered the market with a high-charged nationalistic agenda, the lower level of female literacy discouraged the publishers from centring their texts around women characters. Rather, as the primary readers consisted of boys, male characters became standard as protagonists in these texts while female characters, if any, were relegated to secondary supporting roles to the male protagonists or represented in simplistic stereotypical roles.

Yet, with growing literacy levels and awareness regarding feminist issues, more authors started experimenting with the idea of lead women characters. These experiments, however, had their own limitations. As Michelle Superle points out in *Contemporary English-Language Indian Children's Literature: Representations of Nation, Culture, and the New Indian Girl* (2011), the extent of their empowerment was limited. Her observation is illustrative of texts produced between 1988 and 2008. Within these texts there is a suppression of the harsh realities that women still have to face in the country, such as female infanticide, forced marriages, and child abuse (Superle 13). This was perhaps additionally aggravated by the justification that optimism is crucial to children's texts as child readers are not equipped to handle such unfavourable realities.

Over time, there has been an increase in female literacy but it is still not as significant as compared to male literacy levels, as pointed out by Naomi Wood in her article, "Different Tales and Different Lives", published as recently as 2014. Though a relative balance has undeniably been achieved in terms of gender representation in the cultural sphere as well as in an attempt to break down conventional gender expectations, such changes are often superficial in that they can result in creating newer stereotypes for the modern Indian woman. Within this new articulation, female characters have managed to find centre stage but their roles, while seemingly modernised, have continued adhering to traditional codes, yet under a different guise. Female empowerment remains tied to women's socio-economic status in society and the backing of their male supporting cast, ensuring that such re-imaginings remain limited and restrictive.

An incident in India, reported by *The Wire* in 2017, further validates this point. The article draws attention to a sociology textbook prescribed by the Maharashtra State Board of Secondary and Higher Education for class XII which states:

If girl is ugly and handicapped, then it becomes very difficult for her to get married.

To marry such girls [the] bridegroom and his family demand more dowry. Parents of

such girls become helpless and pay dowry as per the demands of the bridegroom's family. It leads to [a] rise in the practice of [the] dowry system. (*The Wire*, n.p.)

Against such a backdrop, it has been doubly hard for authors and publishers to find an adequate market in which to sell books that question or subvert such representations. This often ensures that efforts to challenge prejudice and inequality are rare or, at best, half-hearted.

Twenty-First Century Efforts to Reimagine Indian Girlhood

From the past decade onwards, however, a number of small independent children's publishing houses have started entering the market, with the clear aim of breaking down gender binaries, despite various hindrances like continued protests from the gatekeepers of such binaries (parents, grandparents, friends and family, guardians, librarians, teachers, and so on – basically all adult mediators who select and purchase books for the actual readers), and low sales figures. Pointing out this trend, Wood writes:

Since the early to mid-1990s, India's children's book publishing industry has burgeoned, with many presses, such as Tara Books (founded in Chennai, 1994), Pratham Books (founded in Mumbai, 1994), and Tulika Books (founded in Chennai, 1996), producing high-quality work with progressive or radical orientations. Recognizing the importance of telling stories about many different kinds of children and rejecting the notion that children ought only to hear about happy or morally proper themes, these publishers see children's books as places to tell important – and traumatic – stories about the recent past. (177)

To expand this list, I would also add the publishing houses Young Zubaan (founded in Delhi, 2004) and Duckbill (founded in Delhi, 2012) as being chief contributors to this trend. The aim of these publishing houses has been to counter previously existing exclusivist tendencies within Indian English children's texts by creating books that are representative of India's heterogeneous and multicultural realities. Authors have attempted this by focusing more on the grim realities that impinge on the lives of young women in India – fighting abuse or, indeed, fighting just to be born, rather than creating aspirational idealised figures that bear little resemblance to the social realities of India. A number of contemporary books have also tried to break the taboo of presenting ill-behaved girls by

portraying strong female characters who can even go as far as to kill for their ambitions – as is evident in Rangachari’s *Queen of Ice* (2014), as I will demonstrate in the last section of my analysis. At the same time, many of these authors have also attempted to venture beyond the limited space of a simplified gender discourse split into the binaries of male/female to include narratives of alternate sexualities, challenging the taboos of heteronormativity and gender transgression. Though the target audience has unfortunately remained limited in numbers, it is important to acknowledge the laudable effort in producing texts that familiarise audiences with versions of alternate marginalised childhoods, particularly female marginalisation, a marginalisation that continues to be a stark reality in contemporary India.

Within the intended target audience for these texts, which challenge socio-normative perceptions, opposition has been severe. Schools have banned such books, and many guardians, who play a key role in selecting and purchasing books for children, have also revolted. E-paper articles, an example of which is “Ten Controversial Books Indian Children Must Read” (2015), providing examples of books from this ever growing list, and written for leading online opinion and commentary platforms like *dailyO*, have been appended with spiteful comments from parents, as the following sample indicates: “We do not need advice from perverts [on] how to bring up our children. We will keep our kids away from these evil prowlers” (Mishra n.p.). -Such sentiments indicate that the purchasing group is still largely divided in their opinions of ‘how much is too much’ for their child. For this reason, even though different stories or discussions of childhood have slowly infiltrated the Indian English children’s literature market, many parents and schools have chosen to ban these books on the grounds of impropriety rather than welcoming such changes. There have also been instances where authors have been forced to change plotlines and resort to stereotypes, like in the case of Ranjit Lal’s *Smitten* (2012), which was initially based on a father abusing his daughter but eventually had to change the character of the father to a step-father after a failed manuscript reading session at a school. Even now, these publishing houses lament, most Indian parents are unaware of these upcoming Indian novels and would rather buy books by Western authors than support their local writers. -Bijal Vachharajani observes:

...writers are cutting through stereotypes and superstition to write books that are reflective of our times...Yet, log onto a bookseller’s website or visit an average bookstore, and you will see fairy tales, mythological and gendered books topping the popularity lists. The appeal of these stories is undeniable. Many of them are better packaged and marketed. Spend a few minutes in the aisles of an airport bookstore, and you will observe that many parents are clueless about most Indian authors.

(Vachharajani n.p.)

Radhika Menon, a publisher from Tulika, agrees that it is not “a lack of talented and sensitive writers” but “a system — perpetuated by the big publishers, distributors and the book-buying institutions like schools and libraries” (“Taboos” n.p.) that has been the biggest challenge in promoting local authors. As a consequence, these small publishing houses (including a few older, more established houses that have also joined the league) aim at identifying such alternative writers and illustrators through their workshops and by publishing their works to show that, although their stories challenge “traditional canons by being unpredictable, innovative, subversive and risk-taking” and often deal “with issues that are taboo or considered unsuitable for children” they are worth telling because in the hands of “a talented writer the same issues are communicated with a sensitivity that opens the child’s mind in ways that more conventional books do not” (Menon “Taboos” n.p.). Thus, without paying much heed to the opposition they have encountered, these publishing houses have continued to strive to overcome “the pressures that stifle creativity: narrow constraints of production costs, government policy, and traditional taboos” (Agarwal 6).

For Tulika, the major focus has been to “create books that convey an ‘Indianness’ that is contemporary and inclusive, reflecting a diverse and plural culture in every respect” (Menon “A trendsetter” n.p.). Menon, the mastermind behind Tulika publishing house, asserts that the goal has been to subvert stereotypes or reflect a reality that adults tend to keep out of narratives in children’s books (Menon “A trendsetter” n.p.). Anushka Ravishankar, one of the founding members of the publishing house, Duckbill, and a renowned Indian English Children’s writer, has revealed:

Our aim is to create books for Indian children which help them understand the complex contemporary world. They’re imbued with the values that are important for our times: the equality of all races, religions and classes, tolerance, justice and kindness. Themes like homosexuality, single-parenting, war and class differences are rare in Indian children’s books [...]. Duckbill addresses the huge gap in books for older children with creations which have fun, whimsy and experimentation in form and content. (George n.p.)

Zubaan, which introduces itself as “an independent feminist publishing house”, announces that the aim of its children’s section. Young Zubaan, has been “to be pioneering, cutting-edge, progressive and inclusive” (“About

Zubaan” n.p.). Shamim Padamsee, the writer, educationist, and driving force behind Youngindiabooks.com, a website which publishes book reviews and papers on Indian children’s literature, has noted that children’s books nowadays “grapple with real problems” and that publishers “do not shy away from publishing books for kids on sensitive topics - female infanticide and drug abuse are no longer taboo topics” (Mazumdar n.p.).

Reading the First Text: Niveditha Subramaniam and Sowmya Rajendran’s *Mayil Will Not Be Quiet!*

Niveditha Subramaniam and Sowmya Rajendran’s *Mayil Will Not Be Quiet!*, which targets middle-grade readers, captures the pre-teen angst of a young girl through topics that include identity crises, sex, heteronormativity, and cross-dressing, among others. Their “spunky, outspoken and totally endearing” (Karim-Ahlawat n.p.) twelve-year old protagonist gives us a sneak peek into her journal in which she has written down everything that involves her, starting from what it means to be a girl and how is it different from being a boy, to who is a transgender, or why it is necessary to be fair, or to how people deal with deaths in the family, or what it is to have a crush on someone, or what happens when you get your periods, or what sex is — there is nothing that concerns her that Mayil leaves out.

Written in a first-person narrative, the authors manage to capture the voice of a “tween” about to enter her teens, and to convey her growing awareness of the outside world. Although this is mainly a narrative of growing up that takes up several questions that plague the mind at that age – including questions that may be uncomfortable for readers – gender issues lie at the core of the book. In a discussion with the team at the publishing house, Saffron Tree, the writers mentioned that this book evolved out of a course that they did in college, of which feminism was a component. On realising that much of it was “heavily theoretical” and likely to be obscure for many readers, especially children, they wanted to find a way to express these issues in a more simplified way. Subramaniam and Rajendran explain:

Since gender is a construct that begins to evolve and develop since birth, we felt the need to create material that addresses it in a practical, everyday basis and from a child’s point of view. The idea for Mayil began as a resource book on gender that could be used in schools and elsewhere to initiate discussions around the subject. However, in the diary format, the book addresses issues beyond gender too. (Arnavy n.p.)

This is the principal reason that, although the text goes on to raise many other questions beyond gender, the main focus remains on how gender biases based on age-old conventions and unchallenged ideas continue to exist and slip into our daily lives unnoticed. The book stands out from many others of its genre because it is able to place such difficult ideas within a text meant for pre-teens, yet is not overtly didactic. The narrative makes the reader aware of the issues that exist in Indian society, which are endured by many young females but are rarely discussed or probed. It does not offer solutions but asks its readers to draw their own conclusions.

The narrative action commences at the beginning of the year 2010, when Mayil is gifted a notebook by her Appa (Father), asking her to write in it every day. The notebook gives Mayil the space to vent without being afraid of what others may think. Though she frequently worries about what would happen if other people, especially her mother, were to read what she has written, she is mostly honest in both her naivety and criticisms within the space of her journal. She is truthful in expressing her jealousies, her insecurities, her crushes, her inquisitiveness about issues she does not understand, or her indignant attitude towards the elders of her family at certain times. Through her voice, the authors are able to suggest the ways in which children realise those particular issues that adults are not comfortable discussing with them, for example sexuality and violence, although they do not always realise why. While looking at these uncomfortable questions, the authors also bring out the attitude of Indian society towards certain subjects that are held as taboos or objectionable, especially in relation to children. This further complicates matters for the child, resulting in her seeking questions and answers from other sources that may be far more problematic.

As an example from the narrative, Mayil is shown to be confused, while learning French from Zainab Aunty, her mother's best friend, as to which words have feminine gender and which have masculine. That is when Zainab Aunty teaches her a little trick: "The trick is to say the words out loud and if it ends softly, it's feminine and if it ends harshly, it's masculine" (13). However, Appa adds to her confusion by grunting that this rule did not fit his daughter as she "didn't talk softly like other girls" (14). Although her Appa laughs it off, Mayil is angry, upset, and confused, and does not really understand how this could be true, given most of her friends are as loud and talkative as her. For her, it is even more confusing because it brings out the contradictory nature of her father: "Sometimes Appa acts so proud of me. My daughter this and my daughter that. Then he just says some things I don't understand" (14). The father, otherwise proud of his daughter, exhibits the gender indoctrination that expects certain behaviour from a girl as opposed to a boy, attitudes which, in a cyclical manner, remain prevalent generation after generation. Further evidence of this may be seen in the story of how Mayil's mother had once revolted against her mother (Mayil's Paati) in order to be allowed to "wear pants" and "cut her hair short" (36). Paati could not understand "why Amma wanted to look like a boy" (36). This shows how appearance and

behaviour become crucial in gender constructs that propagate different expectations of the two sexes, further leading to gender discrimination.

The way these notions unwittingly become part of everyday conversations points to how such constructs overpower rational thinking. It is attitudes like this, ingrained in the adults, that are passed down to their young, making them call a boy like Thamarai “a sissy” (11) for being weak at karate. Through her journal we learn that Thamarai, Mayil’s young brother, would rather “learn film dance” (71) than martial art. Although initially shocked, their Appa relents and gives him the space to learn whatever he wishes. But Mayil is already confused as to what it means to be a boy and how this is different from being a girl, a confusion that makes her judge her brother for wanting to play with Mousina, the expensive vintage doll Zainab Aunty had got for Mayil from France, because clearly “dolls are not for boys” (32). Even when Anu, the girl Thamarai has a crush on, finds the doll in his room, she is curious to know if he plays with it or if it is his “huggy toy” (89), and when she shares the information with her friend P.T. Usha, Thamarai is labelled as “Dolly” (89).

Certain traits in Thamarai seem to set him apart from the average boy of his age as typically represented in Indian English-language children’s literature. He hates karate and loves to play with dolls even though when his friend Mithun comes to their home to play with him, both of them take all of Mayil’s dolls and “bury them in the sand or cake their faces with mud or make them stand on one leg and then laugh” (31). What does it mean to be a son and how is it different from being a daughter? These are questions which enter the narrative quite early in Mayil’s journal when she dares to ask her teacher, Sujatha ma’am, why King Dasharatha wanted a son rather than a daughter in order to “carry” (9) his name. Such questions have no easy answers in Indian culture and society and the teacher is unable to provide a sensible response. Yet, this does not stop Mayil from asking the question all the same: in wondering why King Dasharatha would want a son so badly when history bears proof of brave daughters like Jhansi ki Rani or Queen Velu Nachiyar (10) who fought for their country or ruled kingdoms even though very few people knew about them. In doing so, Mayil puts forth a legitimate query of society and its misplaced gender attitudes.

At home, this gets translated into how different things are expected from the father and the mother. The expectation of the father is that he must earn in order to support his wife, children, and parents. The mother, on the other hand, must sacrifice her career after her marriage and dedicate her life to looking after the household, cooking, and taking care of her children. To illustrate this, the authors use the character of Mayil’s mother, who had wanted to become a journalist before her marriage (86) but is unable to pursue her dream career after her marriage. This frustrates her, making her vent at Mayil and Thamarai. Mayil realises that her mother is angry at something else, but she becomes confused when Amma tells them that she sacrificed her career for them and that

they are being ungrateful. Mayil is aware that many other mothers work and feels that her mother could have also tried. Despite this, when the mother actually has to take up a job, Mayil can't help but miss her being home. This further points out how individuals get oriented, quite early in their lives, according to the prevalent standard gender discourses, causing a confusion in their minds between social expectations of gender and one's own deeply ingrained sense of what is expected of a female in terms of traditional domesticity and nurturing. Mayil's Appa, on the other hand, has a seemingly steady job. He is a financial consultant at the beginning of the story, but loses his job towards the end. While Mayil wonders a lot about the financial situation they would be in if her father lost his job, she realises the full situation only later when her mother has to take up a job and her father is put in charge of cooking — "I screwed up my face at that, but Ma said that was 'sexist' of me" (95). How a family as a unit propagates such attitudes through various generations is also made evident in a passing reference about Mayil's grandparents' marriage. When asked what Paati (Grandmother) loved eating, Thatha (Grandfather) is at a loss — "it's funny but he doesn't really remember Paati eating" (26). Mayil finds this strange, though the text goes no further into the logistics of why an Indian wife is supposed to eat her food only after her husband has eaten his share.

Such typical expectations of a man and a woman within marriage are further probed through the case of Malini Aunty, Mayil's mother's friend. Malini Aunty, who is shown to be a victim of physical abuse, frequently confides her problems in Amma. Later, Mayil comes to know that despite such torture, Malini Aunty had refused to take any action because "he was still her husband and her parents would tell her that she should try and adjust with him" (88), eventually leading to her suicide. One could perhaps use Martin Seligman's concept of "learned helplessness" to understand the behaviour of Malini Aunty, a victim of domestic abuse. Years of cultural conditioning shape the minds of women in such a fashion that they become immune to such abuse, thinking that they have no control over it, and believing it to be a consequence of their own failings rather than a criminal offence.

A further issue that this book focuses on is the curiosity regarding sex that most pre-adolescents have, indicated initially in the text through the discussion of menstruation and how that turns one into a "big girl" (34) and makes the womb "ready to give birth" (53). The social and familial prominence accorded to a girl beginning her periods, which makes her ready for childbearing, is evident from Thatha maintaining Paati's beautiful skirt to give to Mayil once she began her periods. Even among her girlfriends, this is a "big deal" (45). However, Mayil is unable to understand the euphemisms used for periods, one of which is "chum" meaning an "intimate friend" (45). As far as Mayil is concerned, it is just uncomfortable having the sanitary pad brush against one's skin or worrying about stains.

She hates the “sticky-wet” feeling and looking at her pad every time she has to go to the loo (47). The discussion on periods subsequently leads Mayil and her friends to discuss sex and shows how children develop strange notions in the absence of adults explaining the process to them. Most Indian parents, even Mayil’s otherwise forthright mother, do not know how to broach the topic and hence are forced to leave relevant magazines lying in the child’s vicinity instead of directly asking them to read it (67). On the other hand, Mayil seems well informed about same-sex relationships – thanks to her sex-education classes at school – but is generally unaware about other alternate sexualities, such as transgenderism, given the social taboos that are associated with it. The one time that she actually comes across a transgender woman – “not the ones who came in groups, clapped loudly and asked for money” (15) – she comes to the realisation that they are treated differently even though they are like anyone else. People generally ignored them, were scared of them, or made fun of them as did her Appa, who did not let Mayil sit beside this person even though the seat next to her was empty. How this attitude affects young minds is evident when Mayil does not smile back at the transgender even though the person smiles at her while disembarking from the train. The consideration of issues rarely discussed within Indian social settings makes this text unique in that it broaches topics traditionally considered beyond social norms and acceptability.

Reading the Second Text: Devika Rangachari’s *Queen of Ice*

While Mayil observes the historical foregrounding of men over women, Rangachari furthers this proposition with her young adult historical fiction, *Queen of Ice*. The focus of the narrative is a relatively unknown female figure who ruled Kashmir from CE 980/1-1003 in the early medieval period of Indian history (Rangachari 174). The story of the beautiful and intelligent Didda, princess of Lohara, is an important story to tell, because not only was she a woman who dared to sit on the throne, showing her male adversaries their right place, but she achieved all of this with a deformed leg. At a time when a girl child born to a king would most likely be “stifled at birth” (3) for fear that the king would be mocked for not having produced a male heir – that too a lame child – Didda evaded death due to a prophecy made by the king’s astrologer that she was destined for greatness. Narrated in the first-person through two characters, both female – Didda and her carrier, Valga – the novel brings together what is promoted as “an exquisite balance of fact and fiction” (Rangachari blurb) in questioning the gender biases in the writing of Indian history that have suppressed or erased the records of women rulers such as Didda, despite their immense contributions. At the same time, the unconventionality of Didda, born with a deformed leg into a royal family, yet achieving the greatness that the astrologer had predicted for her, gives the author the opportunity to explore feminist issues combined with issues of disability. The plight of being born a woman, especially at the

time in question, is beautifully woven within a narrative that subtly alludes to how certain things remain unchanged even today. At the same time there is a celebration of the strength of a woman who is determined to fight the prejudices associated with disability and eventually wins against all odds.

Granddaughter of Bhima Shahi, the Shahi ruler of Gandhara, and daughter of Simharaja of Lohara, Didda is shown to carry the mark of two great royal houses on both sides. Despite this, she never really receives any love and support from her father, who had yearned for a male heir. Instead, the king bestows all his affection on his late brother's son, Vighararaja (in reality Vighararaja was Didda's nephew, the son of a brother who remains unnamed) (177), who is a year younger to Didda. Her mother, on the other hand, is shown to be extremely proud of Didda, attending to all her needs with utmost tenderness. Described as "forceful, ambitious" by Didda, the queen is caught in a loveless marriage with Didda's "short-tempered, indolent father" who "frittered away his time and money on drunken pursuits and sycophants" (4). The marriage itself is a result of a political alliance traditionally maintained between the two royal houses of the powerful Shahi family of Gandhara and that of Lohara, the text's comment on the practice of using marriages to pawn individuals for future gains. The marriage is proclaimed as "doomed to failure" (4) from its very inception, the failure being blamed on the "mismatched union" (4) between Didda's father and mother. On those occasions when a spat is shown to break out between the two, which becomes more frequent after Didda's birth, it is the queen who is expected to "contain her anger" (6). The only occasion in the narrative when Didda's father is shown to be gentle is when the queen is pregnant with another child after several miscarriages, that too only in the hope of her bearing him a "full-term son" (22). That the woman is merely secondary to her husband in marriage, functioning not as an individual but rather as a biological vessel whose sole purpose is to reinforce male lineage, is reiterated in her father's taunts against Didda: "Learning is wasted on a girl [...] particularly one who will never even use her skills to attract a good match" (6).

Later, when Didda reaches the marriageable age of sixteen, despite her beauty she is unable to attract a proposal because of her disability. This further foregrounds the conventional notions of beauty, especially those expected from women, to make them fit for marriage. She herself resents her lame foot because it makes her look "ungainly and distinctly ugly" (20) and blames her fate for making her the way she is: "unsuitable in a world that has fixed ideals of beauty and desirability" (20). Finally, when her father does find her a marriage proposal, it is for Kshemagupta, the puppet king of Kashmira, an unsuitable groom, to whom Didda would be a second wife. Moreover, the marriage is openly declared as a "trade-off" in exchange for "a little land" (29), thus showing how little a wife is worth. This is equally true of Chandralekha, Kshemagupta's first wife, "a mere pawn in the hands of her father and nephew" (57), who finally embraces sati-hood — she is ready to be burnt alive on her husband's pyre rather than live a life without affection. To hint at the universality of the situation, Rangachari deftly

juxtaposes the fate of a queen and a princess with that of Valga, an ordinary village girl from nearby Udabhandra, the capital city of Gandhara. The eldest girl born to a family of many sisters and one brother, and therefore with too many mouths to feed, she is chosen to be disposed of to her aunt's quarters in Lohara by her father on account of her "heavy features," which have "no semblance of beauty" and which would "never make a good match" (10). Valga's mother, like the queen, is reduced to a silent spectator, sobbing at her husband's decision but unable to defy his command.

Didda is not introduced to us as a calm and obedient child. Instead, she is aware of her "quick temper" (5) and bitterness quite early in her life, just before the age of ten. As she grows older, she starts recognising the two sides to her: one, craving love and encouragement, and the other seeking power to rule and crush those who taunt and humiliate her (40). Even in the account of Valga, she comes across as one who gets what she wants without allowing anything or anyone to "stand in her way" (18), and is almost always ruthless in her dealings. Despite acknowledging her favourable qualities, Valga is not insensible to her faults too, in particular her ugly temper, self-absorption, and stubbornness. (31). Didda harbours dangerous feelings within her heart, ones that make her want to "harm" her father or "wound" Vighraha (40) for treating her with utter disdain firstly for being a woman and secondly for being born a cripple.

This novel does not try to celebrate Didda for the greatness of her heart, but rather for her iron-willed spirit that encourages her to move on the path of greatness despite the obstacles facing her. Being born female, that too with a deformed leg, she is doubly oppressed under a patriarchal society that views deformity as outside social "norms", but still she manages not to lose hope: "My destiny awaits me there [...]. And I will seize it with both hands" (36). However, Didda is not depicted in absolutes but portrayed with great depth and complexity. Though she is emotionally as erratic as any other individual – sometimes generous, sometimes jealous, sometimes friendly, at other times hostile – what she never does is to accept defeat and this is where her greatness lies. Once she is married off to Kshemagupta, she moves to Kashmir, where the strength of her character slowly starts to blossom. Her husband is immediately taken in by her, fascinated by her talk, her questions and observations, and she on her part exerts herself "in trying to dazzle him, bewitch him" (56). However, although her husband falls in love with her, she is never able to reciprocate, judging him as a weak king being controlled by his prime minister and father-in-law, Phalgun. She starts to learn the rituals and practices of her new home with a greed akin to "a squirrel hoarding nuts" (63), acquiring knowledge about the courtly practices, their subjects, and the land in general. Having been told that the masses are "fickle" and "quick to switch loyalties" (63) she ensures they are appeased at all times, a strategy that ultimately helps her fulfil her destiny. After the death of her husband, rather than sacrifice herself on his pyre, she chooses to rule the kingdom as a regent of the young king, her son

Abhimanyu. However, neither her son nor her three grandsons are suitable kings in the making, having no desire to rule, an outcome that sends “a flash of excitement” (92) through Didda. Ruling vicariously provides her with a power that she had always desired and one she cannot understand her son or grandsons not being interested in. Silencing all doubts that a woman is incapable of ruling, Didda not only leads her kingdom for five decades, emphatically assuring its future (172), but also finds acceptance as a ruler despite being an outsider who is also a lame woman. From having people suspicious of her motives, many denouncing her for being a woman yet ruling as a regent (87), mocking her for being a female ruler (96), considering her an usurper, or an “unnatural woman who did not die alongside her husband but chose to play a part in the real world, the world of men” (98), she manages to silence them all by winning wars, putting down rebellions, and converting Kashmira from a weak kingdom “riven by warring factions, known for its bad governance, a tempting prize for a stronger power” (146) to a “powerful, invulnerable, a much-sought-after ally, a place of impeccable governance” (146). From ruling behind her son and grandsons, she fulfils her destiny of ruling in her own right as Queen Didda, minting coins bearing her name and insignia.

Yet, the ruthlessness of Didda is never kept hidden, and she is in fact subtly implicated in the murders of all three of her grandsons and even her own son, all of whom were considered to be weak rulers. As such, she is a leading character who attracts readers through a moral ambiguity that is adeptly woven into her character. She rages at the gods for making her a cripple. She marvels at the inherent irony of a kingdom that is suspicious of a female ruler despite regarding such a position as “the material form of Goddess Parvati” through which “any occupant of the throne of Kashmira is seen as part of the goddess”, the reason why people are shown to worship “the Ardhanarishvara form of Lord Shiva – half-man, half-woman – in the valley” (62-63), but is herself dismissive of female successors or weak kings. This story – with a woman ruler at its centre, born with a deformity, beautiful and intelligent but morally ambiguous and ruthless in her governance tactics, a ruler who manages to fulfil her dreams but still is rendered virtually invisible or trivialised in the accounts of history – has never before been attempted in Indian young adult fiction. It is what marks the text unique in its content, a crucial narrative not only in terms of its historical importance but also in its relevance to a contemporary society in which many of these patriarchal constructs still exist.

Conclusion

Discussions of gender with young children can often be problematic, and such discussions must be undertaken in a way in which the narrative is largely neutral. Given that the readers are individuals with limited life and cognitive

experiences, any sort of ideological manoeuvring could result in accusations of indoctrination, which may hamper the future cognitive growth of the child through overwhelming it with somebody else's beliefs and prejudices. Children's literature has forever battled these anxieties, mostly falling prey to becoming representative of the author's overpowering ideological system, a set of beliefs that may seep into the child's psyche without being adequately filtered. Such indoctrination can have harmful ramifications in the way a child perceives the world, feeding into his or her system with prejudices and stereotypical representations of gender and culture. In being able to imagine girlhood in terms alternative to those that have traditionally dominated twenty-first century Indian English-language children's literature, the texts selected for analysis in this essay have indeed managed to open new spaces by breaking some of the taboos that have plagued the genre. By foregrounding the very voices that have been excluded by such narratives, they have shown that inclusions or exclusions are windows into a world of adult insecurities dedicated to maintaining an inherently false status quo. It is only by deconstructing such exclusions that one can find ways of moving forward to embrace a new age of inclusivity and equality.

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