

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Deconstructing Gender: Picturebooks for Children in India

-Anil K. Aneja

Professor & Head, Department of English, University of Delhi

Abstract

Drawing their potential from their multimodality, picturebooks have historically served as agents of socialization, conditioning children into the mores and norms of society. Countering the dismissive attitudes towards picturebooks, the paper argues that picturebooks are powerful vehicles, not only reflecting societal perceptions of gender but also actively shaping children's understanding of identity and possibility. Focusing on gender representation within Indian context, this paper analyzes two contemporary Indian picturebooks, both published by Tara: *The Toy Story* and *Today is My Day*. Employing a close reading approach, this paper seeks to understand how these specific picturebooks contribute to constructing, reinforcing, or challenging existing gender norms.

Keywords: Indian picturebooks, gender identity, children's literature, gender representation

Any contemporary idyllic parental experience of raising a child invariably envisions a daily ritual of a parent sitting close to the pre-literate child and reading a story aloud from a picturebook. Such an aspiration rests on a foundational belief that picturebooks, among all children's literature, are a venerated medium for developing literacy among young children (Gibson, 2012, p. 104). Beginning with picturebooks thus, children read fairy tales featuring princesses who have blond hair and light eyes, and of princes who ride white horses; Within these colourful pages, big castles, wicked witches and innocent girls come alive. Their universal popularity is such

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that it matters little whether the books are published in Moscow, New York or New Delhi; or the stories are written by Hans Christian Andersen¹, Grimm Brothers² or

¹Hans Christian Andersen, a Danish author born on April 2, 1805, and passing away on August 4, 1875, is primarily celebrated for his literary fairy tales. His collection of 156 fairy tales, compiled into nine volumes, has achieved global recognition, being translated into over 125 languages. These tales are deeply ingrained in

Western culture, enjoyed by children for their imaginative narratives and by adults for their underlying messages of virtue and resilience.

²The Brothers Grimm, Jacob (1785–1863) and Wilhelm (1786–1859), were German scholars best known for their significant contribution to folklore: collecting and publishing folk tales. Their

Anushka Ravishankar³. Consequently, the picture books which are said to “have been around since the 1500s” have come to be a child’s first literary companion (Gooden and Gooden, 2001, p. 89).

According to researchers, picturebooks serve not only as a tool of learning literacy but more significantly as a vehicle for socializing children (ibid.). One of the predominant aspects of socialization is gender identity. “Gender development is a critical part of the earliest and most important learning experiences of the young child” (Peterson and Lach, 1990, p. 188).

Peterson and Lach also assert that picturebooks act as a major influence on gender role development and socialization of young children (ibid.). They observe that there is a strong prevalence of gender stereotypes in picturebooks with male characters often being depicted as positive, active and competent and female characters portrayed as negative, passive and incompetent (185): “The princess remains peering out the window of her castle, watching all the activities on her behalf. While boys play in the real world outdoors, girls sit and watch them—cut off from that world by the window, porch, or fence around their homes” (qtd. in Weitzman et al., 1972, p. 1133).

According to Hartley’s early work (1959) on play, children by the age of four identified that the primary feminine role is housekeeping, while the primary masculine

role is wage-earning (qtd. in Peterson and Lach, 1990, p. 188). Peterson and Lach also highlight that the messages targeting boys focused on action, accomplishment and self-direction, while those books intended for girls reinforced messages of bridle of subservience, self-abnegation, obedience, humility and servitude (189). These stereotypes identified early on, continue to persist even today.

While considerable scholarly work has been done in the context of exploring gender stereotypes within the western picturebooks (Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, & Ross, 1972; McArthur & Eisen, 1976; Kiefer, 1985; Peterson & Lach, 1990; Narahara, 1998; Hamilton, Anderson, Broadus, & Young, 2006; and Paynter, 2011), they remain relatively understudied within Indian context. To address this critical gap, the paper aims to investigate how Indian picturebooks either reinforce or subvert commonly received gender stereotypes, by focusing on the gender portrayal in two popular bestsellers: *The Toy Horse* (1997) story by Deepa Aggarwal (story) and Ajanta Guhathakurta (illustration), and *Today is my Day* (2003) by Anushka Ravishankar (story) and Piet Grobler (illustration).

While delving into the subject, it is important to recognize that the significance of this study stems not only from picturebooks’ primary role in a child’s pre-literate development but also from their powerful

most famous work, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (which translates to *Children's and Household Tales*), was released in multiple editions between 1812 and 1857. This collection was instrumental in popularizing many beloved stories we know today, such as “Cinderella,” “Hansel and Gretel,” and “Snow White.”

³ Anushka Ravishankar is a pioneering Indian author known for her significant contributions to

both nonsense verse in contemporary English and picture books. Her early picture books, including *Tiger on a Tree*, *Catch that Crocodile*, and *Elephants Never Forget*, were among the first from India to achieve international publication and critical acclaim. She has since collaborated with numerous international illustrators to produce exceptional picture books.

ability to explicitly and subtly reinforce gender stereotypes through their multimedia nature. Bader's definition highlights this multimediality as:

A picturebook is text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; a social, cultural, historical document; and foremost an experience for a child. As an art form it hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on the drama of the turning page. (Bader, 1976, p.1).

The text of a picturebook is created with an interaction between verbal and visual information (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2013, p. 5). In addition, when a parent reads it, the personalized audio medium adds another layer of representational realm to the verbo-visual mediums. The innate faith a child reposes in the warmth and bond of the parent who is reading the story, adds an unquestioned credence to the messages being read, thereby turning reading of picturebooks into a potent cultural space for shaping a child's psyche.

Picturebooks, therefore, are "polysemic" texts that exploit the potential of interdependent complexities of form - words, pictures, layout, colours, paper and cover (Mackey & McClay, 2000). The illustrator's role in a polysemic text for long has been to conjure images of "dangerous perils replete with rich kings, beautiful queens, wicked stepmothers, evil witches, terrifying monsters, fire-breathing dragons, and helpless princesses waiting to be rescued by knights in shining armour" (Joshua, 2002). Each of these mediums have a deep impact on the mind of the least-experienced audience i.e. young children as they cross the boundary from the pre-verbal to the verbal worlds.

These works have a literal visual imagination as they often interpret the imagined world as the real.

While critics like Brian Alderson insist that the 'picture books have no ambitions beyond conveying simple delight' (Alderson, 1990), there are a large number of critics who assert that the experience of 'simple delight' hinges on complex and highly sophisticated cultural assumptions about what pictures do and how viewers should view them.

According to Perry Nodelman, pictures are 'iconic' and words are 'symbolic', and interpreting them entails an awareness of culture bound prejudices (Nodelman, 1998, p.70). For instance, the visual of a fat man slipping on a banana peel evokes humour based on certain ideas of the comical and grotesque operative in a culture. Therefore, children must learn these prejudices to make sense of the pictures. The visual world is not referential and doesn't depict a 'real' world but operates in the realm of 'Signs': "A sign, or representamen, is something that stands to somebody for something respect or capacity" (qtd. in Eco, 1979). Hence, Alderson's metaphor of the 'innocent eye' of the child must be replaced with Marshall Blonsky's idea of the "semiotic head or eye that sees the world as an immense message, replete with signs that can and do deceive us and lie about the world's condition" (Blonsky, 1985, p. vii). Thus, the verbo-visual world of picturebooks may persuade the readers of its simplicity while acting as a powerful influencer in fostering and fortifying gender stereotypes.

Having established the potency of the medium, it would be in place to put the scene of Indian picturebooks in context. The establishment of Children's Book Trust (CBT) and National Book Trust (NBT) in 1957 are landmark events in establishing picturebooks in India as it boosted their production. The

two publishing houses sought to replace dull book formats with visually and aesthetically appealing children's books, featuring enhanced colors, textures, and forms. Shankar Pillai, a cartoonist and children's writer instrumental in establishing CBT, also founded the Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children (AWIC) in 1981 to foster dialogue and promote children's books. Later, the 1999 commemoration of the 'Year of the Girl Child' by SAARC⁴ countries further spurred writing on women and children, particularly in India. Indira Ananthakrishnan's *Nivedita's New Home and Other Stories* (1992) pioneered this trend, with many similar works following soon after.

In terms of gender roles, Sudhir Kakar, in his well-acclaimed study of childhood in India, notes that girls "have no sphere of their own, no independent livelihood or activity, no area of family and community responsibility and dominance, no living space apart from men, within which to create and manifest those aspects of feminine identity" (1978, p. 60). He also asserts that learning skills like house-holding, cooking and childcare continues to be the primary way by which a woman establishes herself in the social world and that it constitutes the 'dailiness of girlhood' in India (p. 61).

Picturebooks serve as vehicles for encoding culturally accepted gender norms. This results in girls being represented as sweet, naive, passive, conforming, and dependent (e.g., mothers, caretakers, sisters), while boys are characterized as strong, adventurous, independent, and intelligent rescuers. Such gender dichotomies and stereotypes are consistently mirrored even in

animal stories. The two picturebooks which serve as cases in point are stories both centred on male and female elephants: *Mahagiri* (2019), a picturebook by Hemalatha (story) and Pulak Biswas (illustrator), champions masculine ideals of individualism, self-assertion commingled with compassion through its protagonist, the male-elephant Mahagiri. He exhibits rare courage to rebel against the entire village to rescue a kitten that has fallen into a hole. While the story offers a moral message, it reinforces the gender stereotype of associating self-control and rationalism to masculinity.

Conversely, in Mickey Patel's *Rupa, the Elephant* (1974) depicts its protagonist Rupa, a female elephant, to be insecure, embarrassed and anxious about her appearance. Perceiving herself to be ugly, she tries to enhance her beauty by borrowing peacock's bright feathers and tiger's attractive stripes. However, when the children who are fond of riding on her back find her new *avatar* repulsive and instead prefer her 'plain Jane' look, Rupa bathes in the river to shed her make-up, thereby conforming to a 'proper bourgeois girl' image. Both picture books conclude happily, showing children riding the elephants in a communal setting. However, this seemingly perfect ending deliberately sidesteps complex topics like environmental protection or human and animal rights, while subtly reinforcing ideas of masculinity with independence and femininity with beauty. Thus, these picture books suggest that sexism in children's literature can be insidious—quietly conditioning the reader to accept gender roles and not to question existing social relationships.

⁴ South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

Motivated by a keen awareness of pervasive sexist biases within children's picturebooks, Tara publishing house was established in 1994 by Gita Wolf which seeks to counteract these underlying biases by producing works that are conscious of gender, environment and human rights. In their vision statement, they write "The India we represent is neither a timeless fount of wisdom, nor another struggling developing country. It is dynamic, frustratingly contradictory, often bleak, and always interesting" (Books for keeps). The two works selected for the study, *The Toy Story* and *Today is my Day* are both published by Tara. The following discussion will explore the gender construction in each of the selected works in detail:

The Toy Horse narrates the story of a gypsy girl, Rami, a migrant who lives "in a cart by the roadside" with her parents (p. 2). Both her parents are manual workers—the father makes hammers and tongs from iron and the mother makes toy horses out of cloth. Rami longs to play with the toy horses that her mother makes, but is unable to get them as they are meant for the customers. The mother encourages her to make her own toy horse instead; she says, "Why don't you make a small horse for yourself?" (p. 7). So, Rami makes a horse that has crooked legs but is "so funny" (ibid.). The toy becomes a promise of empowerment for the poor girl as she dreams of flying, leaping, chasing robbers and winning races on the horse. Hence, the toy (as revealed through the dream sequence visuals) becomes a weapon of self-knowledge and is more than just a commodity or a play thing. However, one day a customer—a seemingly well-to-do lady—comes with her little daughter to purchase a toy horse from Rami's mother. The rich girl is fascinated by the crooked toy horse that Rami is playing with and begs her mother to buy just that. The narrative

melodramatically heightens the tragic tension by showcasing a tearful Rami protesting against selling the horse. The bourgeois mother bargains; the gypsy mother tells Rami to pick up a new horse from the lot. A poignant moment follows with the rich child kneeling in front of Rami, offering her own beautiful doll to her. The moment apparently tries to capture the 'contact' between the two girls on an equal footing. Finally, Rami relents and exchanges her horse for the blonde-haired doll. From the perspective of illustrations, the picture book is brilliantly illustrated in oil paints with a stroke of realism. The gypsy clothes (ghagara-choli), jewelry, hairstyles reveal a fidelity to life. The pots, vessels, instruments in the backdrop capture the family's impoverishment. The pictures also reflect the fleeting moods of Rami—both her despair and dreams. The dream sequence is done in shades of grey, orange, red and yellow. While, the customer mother-daughter duo is depicted in urban attires—the mother wears an expensive saree with jasmines in her hair and the daughter wears a short frock with sandals. The interplay between the text and pictures constantly brings to the fore the true-to-life visuals.

In terms of gender construction, it is noticeable that Rami who appears to be around six or seven years of age, has no education, save the natural training of the handwork of making toys from her mother. This highlights how the intersection of gender and class, as in the case of Rami, a girl child from a poor community, often education is not seen as a priority or even a possibility for a girl child. There is hardly any discussion or even a thought spared for her education or schooling. Not only education, but something as basic as a toy—ironically, one made in her own home—remains a far-fetched dream. The picturebook thus holds a mirror to the harsh

realities faced by girl children from marginalized classes in the country, where even aspects of childhood considered natural and integral are denied. And in this scenario, the dream sequence visuals unambiguously lay bare the hidden workings of the gypsy girl's mind—her secret longings for escape, self-actualization and perhaps education. Her fantasizing of her free play with her toy horse in her imagination is also a sad reminder of her unfulfilled present.

The text further seems to focus on the sacrifice of the poor girl and the magnanimity of the rich girl. The former gives up her favourite toy and the latter renounces her doll. Hence, both girls become symbols of self-abnegation for a higher social bonding. The tale seemingly capitalizes on the moral behind this mutual interdependence and co-operation. However, the ending doesn't resolve the social tensions between the two children. The text seems to depict the transaction between the children as spontaneous, while the visuals make it clear that it is an unequal one.

Rami has invested her dreams in the toy horse as it offers her magical possibilities of freedom beyond social marginalization. For the rich girl the toy is just a passing 'fancy'. The exchange of toys is not suggestive of the children's self-expansion but is a metaphor for the exchange of commodities symptomatic of capitalist exploitation in the larger world. The bourgeois mother buys toy horses for money and the daughter merely buys them with her doll! Finally, the ending suggests the entrapment of both girls in their respective social and gender locations. The visuals reveal a jarring, discordant note by showing the absurdity of the gypsy girl holding the yellow haired doll. The apparent denouement itself becomes a point of social crisis.

In the other selected work, *Today is my Day* written by Anushka Ravishankar and

illustrated by Piet Grobler, dramatizes an adventurous day in the life of a young protagonist, Tala. It is a day when she refuses to be an obedient daughter, granddaughter, sister or student. The story has a literary ancestry in the animated story "My No No No Day" by Rebecca Patterson in the read-aloud category.

Today is My Day is a subversive fantasy story that conjures up visions of an alternative girl-child's culture where its protagonist, Tala can disobey instructions at home and school, unlike her usual regular self which complies with every instruction given to her. On this escapade, she has a cat and a hen as her supporters. The story unfolds in a modern, cosmopolitan setting with Tala's exuberant father giving her the morning call, 'Rise and Shine'. The hassled child hates being bothered in the mornings and her father's voice reminds her uncannily of a shrill bird. Annoyed with her father's repeated calls, she imagines him getting transformed into a crow and flying out of the window. The magic seems to happen as today is Tala's day and nobody can dare to order her around. In a similar quirk of her mood and imagination she visualizes all authoritative figures transforming into something else. She facies that her sister who is ordering her to brush her teeth turn into a snooty crocodile; her grandma turn into a cow as she claims to have been drinking "five cans of milk" for sixty years and in its pretext is cajoling Tala to drink her milk; the mathematics teacher turns into a multiplication sign since she is cross with her; her dance teacher into a statue; and finally her mother enters the idiot box, just moments after she asked her to turn it off. While these events of metamorphosis take place in the narrative, Tala constantly asserts, "Leave me alone" or "Let me go" or "Give up" reminding that today is indeed her day. These surreal

events have humorous descriptions as her adventure is written with sensitivity and depth advocating a naughty militancy against hegemony. The girl is not depicted as shy or timid. She laughs when her grandmother moos and shows displeasure when she is forced to wake up very early in the morning.

The subversive fantasy exhibits patterns of wish fulfillment and concludes with a note of rebellion. However, the narrative clarifies that Tala's adventure is provisional and limited to that day: "But tomorrow?/Tomorrow's a different day-/You can flare at me/And glare at me/And I'll try not to fight...Because tomorrow's/NOT MY DAY." Despite the temporary nature of her protest and magical wish fulfillment, the picturebook effectively demonstrates Tala succeeding in challenging authority.

The splendid illustrations are primarily line drawings that make innovative use of black, white, red and yellow colours. Instead of a distinctly Indian ambience, the pictures by Piet Grobler seem to suggest any modern setting that could be anywhere in the world. His illustrations carry energy, simplicity and movement like Quentin Blake's pictures. Blake, the famous English illustrator, is known for his drawings where characteristically "something is always happening, anarchic, unexpected, ridiculous, joyful, mischievous, poignant. He is an artist with a powerful, often strange imagination who wants to make direct, living, vital, fresh contact with the real world" (quentinblake.com). This Blakeian style seems an apt fit for the story of subversive imagination of Tala, as she fantasizes all the authoritative figures vanish and become something other than their usual selves.

In addition, a few objects add to the universal urban setting like the cat, the hen, T.V, bathroom, balcony etc. The characters are

largely caricatures yet they explode with movement and energy. For example, the cat imitating Tala, or father flying away as a crow, or grandmother mooing like a cow. Tala's ribbons, her brown skin, and the motifs on her dress are perhaps the only semblance of Indianness. The illustrations also have a good grasp of gestures.

An image that is positioned both at the start and the end of the picture book is particularly interesting and is worth a closer examination. In this motif, Tala is depicted as a warrior knight with a helmet covering her head as the two plaits humorously stick out of her helmet. The sword and the shield in her hand and the armour covering her body are both literal and symbolic. It highlights what a tough battle it is for a girl child to choose to follow her heart and say "no" to the conventional figures of respect. In this illustration, she reveals her struggles as a female knight in militantly resisting all voices of control around her: the complaining mouths, the pointed fingers, the glaring stare and the unending questions. Thus, the illustration deftly captures the various forces that strive to constrain her and her rebellion against them. This image reifies the norms even as it challenges them, albeit for a day—clearly demonstrating the power of the visuals in picturebooks. With this motif, the book takes a very definitive look at received notions of gender and tries to challenge them. However, the only limitation perhaps is that it does so from the perspective of an upper middle-class girl. Her actions in the ultimate sense gain legitimacy because they are approved by the world that she inhabits.

The two picture books under scrutiny have an interesting relationship both in spatial (readership, reception, distribution network) and temporal terms (date of publication, historical period). Both the books have female

protagonists who dream and possess a mind of their own. However, Rami, the poor gypsy girl has to give up her toy horse and is contained in the ideology of her class, while Tala can be the headstrong, rebellious girl within the parameters of her class.

To conclude, it may be said that the two picturebooks are sensitive to the protagonists' aspirations for freedom and self-expression. While they quietly make a pitch to change the representation of gender in the Indian context, the demands of them being popular literature, possibly restrict their complete secession from the gender norms and expectations. While Indian picturebooks are making a conscious effort to break the confines to which a girl child is conventionally restricted to, it is important that parents and children are made conscious of the politics of gender within these picture books through which they see their world and themselves. They must be given a chance to negotiate their own subjectivity instead of repressing them into conformity to prevailing views. And through such sensitization, the paper hopes to strive towards an environment where children's books have well-rounded male and female characters whose achievements must not be evaluated in terms of gender.

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