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## A NEW INDIAN GIRL: A FIGHTER

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The capacity of young girls to represent a healthy new beginning is nothing new to children's literature. One needs to look no further, for example, than two classics: Frances Hodgson Burnett harnessed this figure's power with Mary in the *Secret Garden*(1911), as did C.S.lewis with Lucy in the *Lion, the witch and the Wardrobe*(1950). Yet the way young girl characters are positioned in contemporary, English language Indian Children's novels by women writers does seem new; these 'new Indian Girls' function to represent a modern postcolonial Indian in which gender equality is beginning to find a happy home. Setting up a binary which positions societal values from pre- colonial India as backwards and problematic, these children's novels demonstrate the value of girls in post- colonial India.

Scholars of children's literature have frequently discussed the connection between women writers and children's texts. In relation to Indian literature overall, the majority of Indian writers of children's fiction are women, for reasons that undoubtedly have to do with their putative understanding of the child "sensitivity". In traditional Indian society grandmothers played the role of oral storyteller; perhaps women writers are taking up this mantle in contemporary context. The production of children's literature even when undertaken by women, does not in and of itself constitute a feminist act; however, the sample novels written by women seem to compromise a feminist literary project, but one that is related to nation- building in complicated ways.

In contemporary Indian children's literature feminist ideology is observable in the widespread presence of girl characters and the pursuit of gender equality, with the result that stories where girls are central characters and initiate action are a common feature. In traditional Indian literature, girl characters were either absent or passive, but over the past few decades, Indian women authors have begun to create children's novels, which refute this pattern; in this sense, most of the novels by women Indian children's authors can be considered a form of feminist children's literature. However, while a work of feminist children's literature can be defined as one in which the protagonist 'triumphs' over gender-related conflicts a prevalent narrative pattern in many of these novels, it can be considered a form that is premised on a feminist ideology espousing "that all people should be treated equally, regardless of gender, race, class or religion" (trites, 1997, P-2), a definition that renders some of the texts problematic.

Karishma Sheth's *Keeping corner*(2007) is a story of a 'new girl' who challenges the traditional boundaries of patriarchy by refusing traditional images of unequal opportunity. The protagonist Leela is compelled by traditional doctrine to 'keep corner' by remaining inside her home for a year after she is widowed at the age of twelve. Even after the year ends, her subsequent life, as dictated by tradition, will remain a segregated subsistence: she will be a social outcast and considered a burden on her family. But sheth images a positive resolution for Leela, who refuses to be constrained by social restrictions on Hindu widows and protests against this unfair treatment. Instead of remaining housebound and dependent, Leela completes her education and influences others to see girls and women capable of providing valuable contributions to society. She later becomes active in Gandhi's freedom movement. She is the epitome of the new Indian girl, a role only emphasized by this text's setting on the cusp of independence.

Forced by her relatives to behave according to strict behavioural codes, newly widowed Leela begins to consider traditional patriarchal Hindu customs and roles for women from a logical and moral perspective informed by liberalism. As a new Indian girl, Leela begins to question tradition and subsequently rejects it after

wondering, “who started this? Can anyone benefit from it?”(Sheth Kashmira, P-59). Eventually she decides she must try to resist tradition:” I realized that this was just a made up rule, and something inside of me snapped. I don’t want to follow this custom”(Sheth Kashmira, P-59). She begins to rebel against the outmoded customs that literally hold her prisoner.

Significantly, Leela does not convince of herself solely as an individual, but rather sees herself as connected with a societal whole once she begins to understand her position as part of the larger condition of child widows, widows in general, and ultimately women’s roles in Indian society. As she becomes familiar with Gandhi’s progressive, modern views on women’s changing roles in India, Leela begins to recognize as unjust traditional,

Social and religious requirements that illogically dictate women’s behaviour; she rails against her family, dissatisfied with their flimsy insistence that this is simply the way things have always been. While Leela initially believes her social position is nonnegotiable due to her fate and the ferocious strength of society versus her own apparent impotence, she later comes to understand that her actions can make a difference in changing her life. In reading the newspaper daily, as well as undertaking other reading for her schoolwork, she becomes familiar with the philosophical values and protest work of activists, including Gandhi, who are leading the struggle to emancipate women in India- as well as India itself. In turn, leela then recognizes that her individual actions can affect her entire society. With the help of such as her teacher and her brother Leela not only acts with agency to fulfill her goals, she also realizes that she can contribute to modernizing Indian society.

In ‘Keeping Corner’ Kashmira Sheth tries to depict a new Indian girl character in leela who is shaped by liberal feminist ideals and successfully balance tradition and modernity; she honours tradition by working from within and improving family and community relationships; at the same time she embraces modernity in her fight for gender equality, which she attains by developing herself through education and by making valuable

contributions to public society, outside of the domestic sphere. For some readers at least, this model of girlhood is likely to be inspirational.

In *Keeping Corner*, the conflation of national progress and gender equality is clearly demonstrated as Gandhi's pursuit of freedom from colonial control is consistently shown to inspire Leela's own pursuit of freedom from patriarchal constraints. She frequently uses his principles and arguments to support her own. For example, she confronts her father by saying, "Gandhiji thinks widows should be able to go to school... what good are his ideas if widows and their families don't take the lead? Ba, I want to study, and I need your help". (Sheth Kashmira, P-236) Eventually her father recognizes that "this is not about Leela, it is something bigger" (Sheth Kashmira, P-246). The new Indian girl as a collective *is* about something bigger: changing social roles for Indian females, roles that ultimately serve a national agenda. Thus, in their own small ways, Leela and other fictional new Indian girl characters create a ripple effect that conceptually expands the boundaries not only of girlhood but also of what comprises the Indian nation. Contemporary women authors such as Sheth re-write traditional Indian stories to foreground girls' and women's education, paid work outside the home, and social contributions to community—all important activities in postcolonial India.

With the help of her teacher and several of her relatives, Leela like many girl protagonists in other novels by Indian women writers, tackles her own tradition-bound gender equality head-on as the central narrative conflict: she becomes a new Indian girl. This becoming can be multitude of forms, but it is always middle-or upper class girls, like Leela, who seek to become new Indian girls. They may strive to secure educational opportunities or insist on participating in activities that have been traditionally designated male. Whatever the challenge, new Indian girls always succeed in overcoming, it, as demonstrated in the example of *Keeping Corner*. Leela is portrayed as becoming inspired by Gandhi and later goes on to participate in the freedom movement in India. She clearly represents a new way of being for Indian girls, but her opportunity is enabled by her class

status; for example, her brother is willing and able to pay for the higher education that qualifies her to become a teacher, allowing her to succeed. What of girls who lack such social and economic support?

This should not obscure the fact that as with the 'new Indian girl', it is primarily urban, middle-class girls who are most likely to gain the empowered state of new Indian girls, while girls from rural regions, low caste groups and low socioeconomic status are either absent from the texts or portrayed as deficient and reliant on new Indian girl to rescue them. This positions the textual image of other versions of girlhood. Clearly this portrayal of the new Indian girl is incomplete, but it can also provide aspirational versions of gender equality, particularly in the pursuit of educational opportunities for girls, an important focus in contemporary India. The overreaching goal of the new Indian girl character is to improve society in accordance with liberal values and to create an imagined positive outcome according to a hegemonic value system; in other words, her job is to transform social gender roles so that middle-class girl can contribute to nation building activities but to leave relatively undisturbed current class and caste hierarchies.

Middle class girl Leela plays the central text in this text. She is empowered and progressive; imagined through the lens of liberal feminism, she acts to expand or even reject traditionally prescribed social roles for Indian girls by insisting that girls and boys are equally valued members of society and deserve equal opportunities, particularly in relation to education and self-determination. Rejecting perspective traditional construction of girls as passive, dependent, restricted to the domestic sphere, and less valuable than boys, Kashmira Sheth celebrates girls and imagine girlhood as an empowered state by positioning girl as central to the narrative and by positioning leela as part of powerful interconnected webs of family and community relationships. Leela unanimously succeed in achieving transformation by acting with agency to improve her own life and the life of people about whom she cares and the well-being of her communities.

Novels such as *Keeping Corner* which imagine girls taking initiative and acting with agency to become new Indian girls by obtaining education and pursuing gender equality can provide inspiration and demonstrate that gender equality may be attainable, the relentless positioning of the new Indian girl as middle-class can also be seen as oppressive. The frequent omission or distortion of class and caste struggles in the quest to become a new Indian girl as a disturbing trend, as demonstrated by *Suchitra and the Ragpicker*. It is also problematic that even when Indian women writers attempt to include low-caste girls or those from outside the middle class, they often do so in a token manner that perpetuates stereotypes and ultimately maintains a hegemonic order in which powerful middle and upper middle classes define parameters of existence for others.

As imagined by Indian women writers in many English-language children's novels, the new Indian girl is a savior: in emancipating herself and others and pursuing gender equality. Leela in *Keeping Corner* is one such girl who, transforms herself and her community, ultimately providing a valuable contribution to postcolonial India by creating an empowered balance between tradition and modernity. She symbolizes a new way of being not only for Indian girls, but also for the Indian nation.

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