

CHILDREN AND THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF GENDER THROUGH SELECTED INDIAN ANIMATION SERIES

Dr Garima Gupta

*Asstt Prof
Dept of English
University of Jammu*

ABSTRACT:

The seemingly ideologically neutral sites are the most influential ones in promoting, propagating and sustaining the stereotypes in any culture. Animation is one such domain. Widely viewed by children at an age in which they are most susceptible to the ideological conditioning, the animation movies provide a perfect platform for propagation of prevailing gender stereotypes. In Indian context, in particular, the animation has picked up pace in the recent few years with the popularity of such series as Chhota Bheem being unprecedented. However, these series serve to reinforce the prevailing gender inequality in the garb of promoting Indian values.

Keywords: Gender inequality, animation, children's literature, television, patriarchy

According to Susan D Witt, "If the child frequently is faced with gender biases and gender stereotypes, this knowledge will be incorporated and influence perceptions regarding men and women. Keeping in mind young children with developing minds watch many hours of television, and recalling television reinforces gender stereotypes, it is not surprising children come away from this television experience with firmly held beliefs. Frequently these beliefs are stereotyped with regard to gender" (8). Theories on media effects include social cognitive theory of gender development and differentiation as well as social learning theory. In social learning theory, Bandura and Walters state that children model, imitate and adopt the behavior they observe in their social environment as much as behaviors they see on television. A study by Nathanson et.al illustrates that television has a huge impact on children's attitudes towards gender identification of certain traits and behaviors, as well as the reinforcement of gender stereotypes. Fictional

representations of characters in movies have a powerful socializing effect on the lives of children because the boundaries of reality and fantasy are blurred for them. According to Huntemann and Morgan, permanent media exposure contributes to "the cultivation of a child's values, beliefs, dreams and expectations, which shape the adult identity a child, will carry and modify throughout his/her life"(311). Thus media plays a definite role in modeling gender-specific behavior in children.

Having taken a cognizance of this, children's literature became a vibrant area of research. Fairytales considered as 'classics' were re-read to expose the gender ideology that was perpetuated in them. As Patricia Mathew and Jonathan Greenberg remarked, "because our students encounter these children's texts during the very time of life when they are unconsciously absorbing ideological codes, their emotional investment in the ideological legitimacy of such texts is so high that these texts appear, ironically

to be uniquely free of ideology” (218). Thus the embedded gender ideology remained invisible for quite sometime. Children’s animation produced largely by Disney was mostly based on these fairytales and fared no better when analyzed for the biased representation of gender.

The studies on the gender stereotypes in children’s literature appeared in the early 1970’s (Louie, 2001) as a fall out of the women’s movement and the western academia has not looked back since then. The Indian scenario, however, is quite different. The children’s literature in general and animation in particular has not been able to attract the attention of the scholars. Hence the present endeavor. Moreover, I do not claim to represent the Indian scenario as I analyze only the cartoons and children in Hindi language. The method I apply is of content analysis since content analysis represents the most appropriate methodology for obtaining and classifying the data related to the stereotyping of male and female characters featured in children’s animation. The world of children’s television has many gender stereotypes. Content analyses of television programs have long documented pervasive gender stereotyping in the number of male and female characters portrayed, the kinds of behaviors enacted, and the emotional modes of expression used by characters (Calvert, 1999). Although television content is but a microcosm of the general culture, such portrayals serve to reinforce gender-stereotyped values and behaviors. This method is defined by Berger as “a research technique that is based on measuring the amount of something in a representative sampling of some mass-mediated popular art form” (25).

This content analysis focused on the analysis of the major and minor characters. Three analytical areas were explored: character’s physical appearance, social roles and behavior.

A survey of the children’s magazines in Hindi crops up names like *Chandamama*, *Champak*, *Nandan* and *Parag* which are all widely reputed. However, an analysis of their contents and conceptual framework reveals the deeply embedded gender stereotypes. *Chandamama* and *Champak* borrow from the *Panchtantra* and *Jataka* stories. *Nandan* has a potful

of stories about fairies and other characters from the realm of magic. *Parag* has secular stories, which nevertheless, are deeply embedded in the Indian social ethos. Needless to say that due to their basic conceptualization, they cannot escape the gender bias inherent in the Indian ethos and culture which dictates their representations of gender and re-inscription of gender stereotypes as sanctioned by the society at large.

If we come to children’s animation in India, it is heartening to see that in the recent years many indigenous cartoon series have been launched. Prior to this we have a whole generation fed by He-man, Spiderman, Superman and the other series which were exclusively produced in the west. However, a review of the indigenous cartoon series reveals that most of them are mythological in their character like *Bal Hanuman*, *Bal Ganesh*, *Krishna Aur Balram*, *Roll no. 21* (based on the modernization of the Krishna-Kans story) and the list goes on and on. I do not deny that these are an effective way of acquainting our children with our mythology. But what about the gender stereotyping inherent in the mythology? The representation of women in these series does not in any way deviate from the norm. As explicated by Signorelli in his cultivation theory, the permanent and consistent exposure to stereotypical images in the media influences the perception and attitudes of children and results in cultivation which contributes to the conception of social reality.

The only secular cartoon series on the Indian television are *Chhota Bheem*, *Kumbh aur Karan* and the most recent *Fukre* all being a current rage with children. An analysis of the representation of female characters in these two would reveal the current pattern of gender representation in children’s animation. According to Kelly Eick, a researcher of cartoon stereotypes, there are four different types of cartoon characters: the masculine male, the inadequate male, the delicate female and the modern female.

The masculine males are usually the leader or main characters of their cartoon and are often the direct cause of conflict resolution. “Bheem”; “Kumbh” and “Karan”; and, “Choocha” and “Honey” can easily be recognized as fitting in this category. On the other

hand the inadequate male has an inadequate body type, lacks muscles, lacks physical stamina, and overall lacks masculine characteristics. They are often fearful, weak and lack courage. They usually do not have much of an effect on conflict resolution."Laali", "Kalia", "Kichak", "Dholu" and "Molu" easily fit this category. If they do they often stumble upon a resolution in a comical manner.

The delicate female is the female equivalent to the masculine male. They are delicate, innocent, thin and dress in a manner that would prevent them from doing tasks typically thought of as male tasks. "Indumati" and "Tara" easily fit the description. Modern females on the other hand are not as delicate and generally have more input on problem solving than the delicate females do. The only character to fit in this category is "Chutki". "Bholi" falls in an entirely different category as she is shown as the leader of a gang and commands the loyalty of two stout boys "Changu and Mangu".

According to Calvert (1999) the villains in the cartoon characters are also most-often than not males. As in most cartoons, the hero-villain dynamics dominate the plot of the cartoon; female characters are limited to only supporting roles.

An analysis of the characters of "Indumati", "Bholi", "Chutki" and "Tara" reveals amply the gender stereotyping in animation. First and foremost, the ratio of the male and female characters is 3:1 and *Chhota Bheem* and 2:1 in *Kumbh aur Karan* and almost 5:1 in *Fukre*. Therefore, it is mostly boy's world that children view in these cartoon series. Another pertinent observation is that in *Chhota Bheem* none of the male characters are given any parental figures to exercise patriarchal control over them. Neither "Bheem", nor "Kalia", nor "Dholu-Molu" are given a set of parents. Raju's father is hinted at but he is a soldier who is always away on war or missions for the king Chutki and "Indumati", however, are not left free. "Chutki" is given a mother who looms large over her and makes the "ladoos" that "Chutki" feeds "Bheem" (fulfilling the traditional role of "Annapurna") that are a source of his strength. "Indumati" is the daughter of the king of Dholapur. A princess, she is typically portrayed as the delicate female. Both "Chutki" and

"Indumati" are dressed in skirts and blouses which are mostly pink or lavender in shade. Both have long hair typically tied in a single or two ponytails. Both these characters do not in any pronounced way deviate from the qualities that are claimed to be feminine. "Indumati", as a princess, is presented as a complete embodiment of these qualities. She is very delicate soft spoken, always by her father's side, obedient and to a large extent passive. She might be a part of the conflict, but never of conflict-resolution.

"Chutki" on the other hand fares little better. Though her character cannot escape the connotation of "Annapurna", she is not delicate as "Indumati". She is the integral member of the Bheem's gang and participates in all the adventures undertaken by the group. She is not passive like "Indumati". She also gives inputs that help in conflict resolution. However, she is never the direct cause of conflict-resolution-the responsibility being that of "Bheem" solely. Moreover, her place is firmly secured as being second to "Bheem". Moreover, when "Bheem" goes for any activities like archery competition or wrestling, that are essentially considered as male domains, "Chutki" is relegated to the periphery and it is "Raju" that becomes a befitting companion to "Bheem". The qualities that "Chutki" is mostly praised for by the group are mostly kind-heartedness and generosity and sometimes even intelligence but never valor that is exclusively the domain of men. Moreover, the fact that "Chutki" is not given a proper name. Even the monkey in the series is named "Jaggu" but "Chutki" is just "Chutki".

In *Fukre* as well, the only male character given the visible father figure is "Laali" and hence he is most fearful of "papaji di chapped". As "Bholi" is shown as an assertive female character, she is not given a set of parents that are visible on screen.

Tara fares no better. In her character, she is more allied to "Indumati" than "Chutki". Flanked by two male characters, there is no room for her to be active self-spoken, delicate and kind hearted, she most often than nor acts as a harmonizer and pacifier between "kumbh" and "Karan". She does accompany the boys in their adventures, but mostly like "Indumati" is a cause of conflict, but never conflict resolution. If at all

she gives any input towards the resolution, it is negligible. Being a girl she also lends a hand to dadi in cooking.

Thus the analysis of the female characters in the children's animation on the Indian silver screen reveal that all of them are drawn within the firm bounds of the patriarchal set up. Stereotypical, they cannot escape their gender. "Chutki" does represent the modern female but strictly within the norms of patriarchy. Moreover, she is not the princess. According to Cohen, identification with media characters plays a crucial role in children's internalization of certain values, norms and behavior. Children engaging in identification will more likely memorize the behaviors and actions of the characters they identify with. Further, Maccoby and Wilson (1957) suggest that in case of Children similarity is less important to identification than role modelling. Hoffner (1996) found that character gender predicts the traits young viewers used to explain wishful identification (wanting to be like the character). Male characters were liked by both boys and girls for their intelligence. In contrast, female characters were judged by both boys and girls solely based upon their looks. And most little girls want to be princess. The plight of "Indumati" is even worse. Though a princess, her father does not even once consider her as the inheritor of the crown. He firmly convinced that after him, it is "Bheem" that shall inherit the throne. The any hint of female character assuming a position of power is firmly rooted out.

To conclude, a child begins to recognized gender differences from seven months onwards. But the awareness of his own gender with ensuing gender-roles and gender appropriate behavior comes by the age of seven. During this time everything from the behavior of the parents, to school environment, to peers, to toys, to the socio-cultural set up the mould for his gender perception and media is most powerful of them all.

WORKS CITED

- Bandura, A., and R.H. Walters. *Adolscnt Agression: A Study of the Influence of Child-Training Practices and Family Interrelationships*. Roland P, 1959.
- Berger, A. *Media Research Techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1991.
- Calvert, Sandra L. *Children's Journeys Through the Information Age*. Boston: McGraw- Hill, 1998.
- Calvert, Sandra L., et al. "Gender Stereotyping in Children's Reports About Educational and Informational Television Programs." *Media Psychology* 5. (2003):139-62.
- Calvert, Sandra L., and Jennifer A. Kotler. "Children's and Adolescents' Exposure to Different Kinds of Media Violence: Recurring Choices and Recurring Themes." *Research Gate*.
- Cohen, Jonathan. "Audience Identification with Media Characters." *Psychology of Entertainment*. Eds. Jennings Bryant and Peter Vorderer. NY & London: Routledge, 2006. 183-97.
- Eick, Kelly. "Gender Stereotypes in Children's Television Cartoons." 1998. Web. Date of access. <<http://cla.calpoly.edu/~jrubby/495/paper1.html>>.
- Greenberg, Jonathan, and Patricia Mathew. "The Ideology of the Mermaid: Children's Literature in the Intro to Theory Course". *Pedagogy* 9.2, 2009. 217-33.
- Hoffner, C. "Children's Wishful Identification and Parasocial Interaction with Favourite Television Characters." *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 40.3, 1996. 389-402.
- Louie, B. Y. "Why Gender Stereotypes Still Persist in Contemporary Children's Literature." *Beauty, Brains, and Brawn: The Construction of Gender in Children's Literature*. Ed. S. Lehr. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001. 142-51.

Maccoby, E.E., and W. C. Wilson. "Identification and Observational Learning from Films." *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 55.1 (1957): 76-87.

Morgan, Michael. "Mass Media and Identity Development". *Handbook of Children and the Media*. Edited by, Dorothy G. Singer and Jerome L, Sage, 2001. 311.

Nathanson, Amy I. "Counteracting the effects of female Stereotypes on Television via Active Mediation." *Journal of Communication* 52.4, 2002. 922-937

Gerbner, George, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, and Nancy Signorielli. "Growing up with television: The cultivation perspective." *Against the Mainstream: The selected works of George Gerbner*. Edited by M. Morgan, Peter Lang, 2002. 193-213. .

Witt, Susan D. "The Influence of Television on Children's Gender Role Socialization: A Review of the Literature." Web. <http://gozips.uakron.edu/~susan8/arttv.htm>>.