

1 **Biases, Binaries, and Belonging: Gender in Contemporary Indian Children's Literature.**

2 **Abstract**

3 Contemporary Indian children's literature has witnessed a marked shift in its representation of
4 gender. Departing from earlier narratives that normalised obedient femininity, dominant
5 masculinity, and the erasure of queer identities, recent texts increasingly expose gender as a
6 social construct sustained through repetition, discipline, and unequal power relations. This
7 article examines how *Mayil Will Not Be Quiet*, *Queen of Ice*, and *The Boy in the Cupboard*
8 challenge the cultural processes through which children learn to perform gender from an
9 early age. It argues that childhood is one of the primary sites where ideas of femininity,
10 masculinity, bodily respectability, and acceptable desire are first imposed and internalised. By
11 foregrounding issues such as body surveillance, gendered expectations, behavioural policing,
12 female agency, and queer visibility, these narratives disrupt the assumption that gender roles
13 are natural or inevitable. They also reimagine family and social spaces as locations where
14 inherited norms may be questioned rather than simply reproduced. In doing so, contemporary
15 Indian children's literature transforms the child from a passive recipient of patriarchal values
16 into an active subject capable of interpreting and resisting them.

17 **Keywords:** Indian children's literature; gender roles; femininity; masculinity; identity; queer
18 child; patriarchy

19 **Introduction**

20 Children's literature in India did not arise in the form of an unbiased imaginative space.
21 Earlier narrative traditions, whether canonical collections such as the *Panchatantra* or widely
22 circulated popular formats like the *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Chandamama*, created a highly
23 stratified society in which gender and sexuality were limited to predetermined and
24 unchallenged assumptions. Male characters appeared in these stories as the paragon of
25 rationality, authority, and agency, while female ones took a much narrower form of sacrifice,

26 obedience, or moral degradation. Moreover, queer characters were completely erased, with
27 heterosexuality presented not as one type of relations among many, but as the only
28 conceivable form of desire and belonging. Both processes of stereotyping and exclusion have
29 become structural features normalizing the hierarchies of gender and heterosexuality in the
30 very imagination of childhood reading.

31 This exclusion results from ideological intent which can be seen in the way early Indian
32 children's literature represented social conditioning of a young individual and their
33 integration into the system of beliefs, values, and attitudes that dominated the society.
34 Through limiting the imagination to socially appropriate narratives, these texts define what
35 should be regulated(femininity), what should be supported(masculinity), and what should
36 never come to be(queerness).

37 What distinguishes modern Indian children's literature from its predecessors however, is that
38 it no longer views childhood as an inactive period of moral education. Rather, children's
39 literature today realizes that issues relating to gender, identity embodiment, and power are not
40 something one suddenly begins thinking about as an adult; rather, they are already being
41 formed during childhood. To ignore such issues is to create further ignorance, and therefore,
42 modern texts now tackle issues previously viewed too explicit for young minds including
43 topics like gender fluidity, self-sovereignty, domestic abuse, and sexuality. Far from
44 overwhelming the child, modern stories incorporate complex issues in a way that allows
45 children to remain curious instead of ignorant.

46 Contemporary Indian children's literature in India is no longer limited by its expansion of
47 representation but has transformed into something much bigger. It has become a tool to
48 challenge society rather than conform to it. By moving away from rigid notions of gender and
49 sexuality, they create room for doubt, inquiry, and diversity. Most significantly, they have
50 ceased to regard the child as passive, and acknowledge the active and intellectual capability

51 of the child. Within this transformation, texts such as *Mayil Will Not Be Quiet* (2014), *The*
52 *Boy in the Cupboard* (2021), and *Queen of Ice* (2014) exemplify how feminist and queer
53 interventions operate across narrative, thematic, and epistemological levels. Rather than just
54 including marginalized identities, they question the very conditions that made such
55 marginalization possible.

56 **Mayil Will Not Be Quiet (2011)**

57 While *Mayil Will Not Be Quiet* by Niveditha Subramaniam and Sowmya Rajendran follows a
58 child's coming-of-age journey, it simultaneously rethinks childhood as site from which
59 dominant structures may be questioned. Gender, bodily regulation, and inherited social
60 assumptions are presented as ideas vulnerable to scrutiny aligning with the claims of Anurima
61 Chanda who stated that the twenty-first century Indian children's literature has shifted from
62 "didactic and moralistic"(Chanda 85) storytelling toward more plural frameworks attentive to
63 marginal voices and questioning.

64 The diary structure of the text gives Mayil a relatively free space of articulation where adult
65 authority is temporarily suspended. This diary becomes a place of interpretation on her own
66 terms. This perspective becomes crucial when she confronts normalized patriarchal values
67 such as her discomfort with a son preference in the Dashratha narrative probably due to
68 lineage politics revealing how irrational such traditions appear when viewed through a child's
69 eye who has not yet fully internalised socially constructed ideologies. Her questioning
70 becomes a feminist gesture revealing that gender preferences survive through repetition
71 rather reason.

72 The text also shows how gender is produced through ordinary and everyday life choices that
73 may seem little. Dolls are assigned to Mayil while karate to Thamarai, her younger brother.
74 Such distribution suggests that gender roles are socially allocated rather than naturally
75 emerging. Thamarai's resistance to karate and his interest in activities labelled as feminine

76 provoke ridicule, particularly through the term sissy. This reflects what Dr. Komal Yadav
77 identifies as “heteronormative policing” (Yadav 24), where individuals are pressured to
78 conform to socially allocated gender roles. Yet the text also exposes the weakness of this
79 enforcement by showing Mayil respond to Thamarai’s attachment to a doll without any
80 judgement. She puts her brother’s preferences over society’s categorization.

81 The tension between personal preferences and social administering becomes lucid in the train
82 chapter where Mayil encounters someone who does not fit into the binary expectations of the
83 society. Fear and discomfort circulate collectively with passengers avoiding them, and
84 Mayil’s father encouraging similar distance. Her early understanding of this individual is
85 mediated through peer language, rumours, and other stereotypes such as the term “eunuch”
86 (Subramaniam and Rajendran16) being casually used to describe them. Zainabaunt’s
87 interruption however, demonstrates that curiosity and understanding becomes the crux of
88 getting out of the cocoon where one is trained to follow only what is socially acceptable.

89 The body is likewise presented as a socially regulated space where beauty standards, fairness
90 creams, and peer’s remarks reveal how early a girl is subjected to assessment. Mayil’s
91 discomfort with her stomach and changing body, even refusing to call breasts with its name
92 because of how weird it sounds to her, reveals her distance from accepting who she is. And
93 this may come from a place of constant judgement and unconscious comparison. Even the
94 representation of menstruation is sometimes shown in light of reproductive identity or how
95 adults consider it as becoming a “big girl” (Subramaniam and Rajendran46). Hence
96 emphasising the idea that girl child is expected to behave maturely as soon as she hits puberty
97 even though they are essentially just children.

98 However, such a narrative is disrupted when her mother encourages her to look beyond what
99 people say and focus on what she decides of herself. She assures her that the agency to decide
100 how she is rests purely on her and no one else while actively validating her by telling her that

101 she is beautiful. In such cases, family emerges out of the earlier conception of regularity and
102 authority, and transcends into a nurturing unit. Even among the surveillance of the mother
103 when Mayil lies to watch a movie, there lies care and compassion. The father who initially
104 appears to be influenced by societal prejudices later teaches Mayil to defend herself and
105 speak if harmed. His eventual acceptance of Thamarai's desire to pursue dance also
106 represents how one can break the chain of societal expectations by being open and accepting.
107 Ultimately, *Mayil Will Not Be Quiet* shows that gender norms lose their inevitability once
108 examined through an unbiased perspective and questioning. It also emphasises the need to
109 change perceptions as time changes and create environments where children feel safe and
110 welcomed within spaces traditionally viewed as regulated and strict.

111 **Queen of Ice (2014)**

112 *Queen of Ice* by Dr. Devika Rangachari, published in 2014, challenges the conventional
113 divisions of morality and prescribed gender roles. It reshapes the representation of female
114 identity and what child readers are encouraged to expect. Instead of presenting an ideal female
115 protagonist defined by goodness and obedience, the novel portrays Didda as determined,
116 politically astute, and at times uncompromisingly ruthless.

117 Her character is inspired from the real historical queen of Kashmir, placed within the
118 intersectionality of being a female and disabled, who rejected culturally sanctioned femininity
119 designed via passivity, beauty, emotional compliance, and moral softness. She focuses on
120 political authority and strength instead. By presenting such a character, Dr. Rangachari
121 actively breaks the historical connection between femininity and innocence, often seen in real
122 life and literature as well.

123 Her father's statement, "A woman doesn't rule Didda. Only a man can occupy a throne"
124 (Rangachari 25), might seem like a personal prejudice against women. However, when a
125 person which such an ideology is at power, it influences a whole lot of people and doesn't

126 remain private anymore. Marriage likewise becomes a transaction in the life of women as
127 evident in Vigraharaja's declaration: "You are being sold, Didda. Your father has sold you
128 for a paltry bit of land" (Rangachari 29)

129 Queen Didda, literally and literary, went against this framework and refused to commit Dati
130 when her husband died. She was met with a lot of criticism with the famous medieval
131 chronicler Kalhana calling her a "disgrace to the women kind for doing so" (Beig 150).
132 However, her later assertion, "I am now king and queen in one. Kashmir belongs to me and
133 mine only" (Rangachari 149), challenges her father's earlier comment proving that a ruler
134 doesn't have any gender. She herself embody the qualities of both the king and the queen, and
135 confidently claims agency over Kashmir.

136 The novel rejects the conventional understanding of morality by refusing to present Didda as
137 either right or wrong. In fact, she represents the true human who is composed of both sides of
138 morality and values equally and learns to regulate and mediate between them. This also
139 provokes a question as to why are female characters expected to fit into categories where they
140 are either too good- implying they are obedient and passive, or villainous- implying they
141 speak up for themselves and doesn't follow what society forces them to do while male
142 characters are termed heroic and strong for doing the same.

143 Voice is equally significant because the narrative sides with those who gets to narrate the
144 story. Didda and Valga speak for themselves, refusing to be objects of history. Dr. Rangachari
145 herself stated in "Devika Rangachari on her book *Queen of Ice*" that her interest emerged
146 from dissatisfaction with male-centred histories that reduce women to decorative margins
147 (Parag An Initiative of Tata Trusts 01:38). The text may therefore be read as a feminist
148 historiographic recovery.

149 All in all, the novel dismantles the assumption that children require neat moral binaries and
150 passive heroines. Instead, it presents them as intellectually capable of engaging with female

151 ambition, political ruthlessness, and ethical ambiguity. Additionally, it also presents women
152 in their full capability instead of showing them as weak and compliant.

153 **The Boy in the Cupboard (2021)**

154 Harshala Gupte's *The Boy in the Cupboard*, published in 2021, takes this exploration further
155 by focusing on how a child comes to understand and inhabit a sense of self that does not align
156 with expected norms. In carefully following the experiences of the child, the text illustrates
157 how the process of identity formation is both influenced by ordinary life events and emotions,
158 and shaped by the constraints placed upon it. It raises the question of how the 'normal', far
159 from being something we learn about, is also something we are expected to inhabit, perform,
160 and constantly negotiate.

161 When Karan retreats into the cupboard, he is not just escaping other children but also seeking
162 a space where he can exist without judgement. As he says, "In here, I am who I always
163 thought I'd be" (Gupte 5). Sarkar similarly observes in *Queer Visibility in Indian Picture*
164 *Books* that "Karan finds himself safer and happier inside the cupboard," (p.18) where is able
165 to drape a saree and twirl freely without fear of ridicule. The cupboard thus functions as a
166 counter-space that resists dominant norms and unsettles the conventional metaphor of
167 'coming out' as movement from darkness in to light. In the narrative, the external world is
168 marked by hostility and rigid expectations, while the enclosed interior becomes the only place
169 where authenticity is possible. This reversal portrays how spaces are socially coded and
170 regulated, suggesting that selfhood is not always secured through visibility, but sometimes
171 through refuge from surveillance.

172 Karan is mocked for his "pink bat" and "kitchen set" (Gupte 8). Karan's statement, "I twirl
173 with joy... they laugh, those boys" (Gupte 6), captures how even ordinary gestures are
174 supposed to be monitored so that others don't see you as an 'outcast'. The issue is not the act
175 of twirling itself, but what it comes to signify within a rigid gendered system that associates

176 grace, softness, and playfulness with femininity, and therefore treats them as inappropriate for
177 boys. Objects such as toys and colours similarly become coded markers through which
178 children are sorted into acceptable identities. By showing how harmless gestures and
179 preferences provoke hostility, the text exposes the fragility of gender norms, which must be
180 constantly defended through policing even in everyday play.

181 The family, however, becomes a site of affirmation rather than a socializing authority.
182 Karan's mother reassured him that there is nothing to fear marking a transition from
183 regulation to acceptance. In the later scenes, both the mother and the father are seen playing
184 with the same kitchen set Karan was mocked for. The imagery of the parents extending a
185 welcoming hand through the cupboard keyhole shows how family support can bring light into
186 moments of darkness for a child, thus forming their self-confidence and self-esteem.

187 Through this narrative, queer intervention in Indian children's literature works on multiple
188 levels: it exposes normativity as socially constructed, reclaims spaces associated with
189 marginality, and reimagines what forms of identity and belonging become possible for the
190 child.

191 **Conclusion**

192 The most important intervention made by contemporary Indian Children's Literature lies in
193 the refusal to treat gender as natural, fixed, or beyond questions. Rather than presenting
194 masculinity and femininity as stable identities to be accepted and performed, these texts
195 reveal how gender is produced through repeated expectations, social rewards, silences, and
196 punishments from an early age. Childhood emerges as one of the first spaces where these
197 norms are taught- through family structures, bodily discipline, language, behaviour, and ideas
198 of respectability.

199 It does more than diversify representation as it unsettles the very structure through which
200 gender inequality is normalised. Its radical potential lies in addressing readers at the stage

201 when social roles are first internalised. If earlier texts often trained children to inherit
202 patriarchy unquestioningly, these newer narratives invite them to interrogate it. In that sense,
203 their greatest achievement is not merely that they portray different kinds of children, but that
204 they imagine a future in which children are no longer asked to perform gender, but are free to
205 define themselves beyond it.

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