

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The process children go through when constructing their gender roles is an important part of their knowledge construction. In fact, gender is considered "the basic dimension" through which children identify their place in society. Children are innately guided by their cognitive processes to see gender as a criterion that determines their social behaviour. Therefore, it would be inaccurate to assume that children are merely "passive recipients of adult instruction". Instead, they are "cognitive constructivists" who are constantly classifying and categorizing the world around them.

Children absorb a considerable amount of information in their impressionable early years, and this contributes to the development of their social identities. From a very young age, children learn to use gender as a way to differentiate people and categorize the world around them, and this affects all aspects of their lives. Children's books play an important role in helping young children in this process of identifying and categorizing gender roles. When these books portray stereotyped gender images, they can adversely affect children's notions of what it means to be female or male. When evaluating children's books, attention must be paid to messages about gender construction because they affect identity construction in young children. Particular attention must be paid to the identity of characters in the texts that depict oversimplified gender-role

stereotypes, which may contribute to establishing and reinforcing sexist attitudes.

Researchers have concluded that gender-stereotyped behaviour in children's literature can be transmitted through both the written text and through the accompanying illustration. This is a matter of concern because stereotyping has a "reductive tendency" through which certain traits are deliberately emphasized and exaggerated while others are suppressed.

Children's books have a profound influence on child development, because they serve young children as "a kind of guide to the way the world is". However, the worlds books present to children are not a world in which most of us would wish our own children to live. The present thesis has made an attempt to that female characters are overwhelmingly underrepresented, females are depicted in stereotypical ways and examples of the male gaze are prevalent.

Children's books are powerful agents of cultural ideology which, using language, teach children to accept systematic power imbalances in society. Ideology is "meaning in the service of power," and language is the means by which messages of domination are established and maintained. Popular culture, of which children's literature is just one manifestation, is ostensibly created in response to children's preferences and desires. However, childhood is also constructed, by children, from cultural materials and their meanings. Children's literature is "a means of measuring society's basic assumptions.

Prevailing ideas tend to be mirrored in children's books, and the books then reinforce the ideas" (MacCann, 197). When these ideas are saturated with social inequality, and because children "often use popular culture to learn about discourses of 'race,' ethnicity and gender" (Ali, 45), these cyclical social constructions are politically charged. Television advertising aimed at children contains strikingly stereotypical gender portrayals; children are introduced to gender norms at the same time that they are introduced to foods and toys (Johnson & Young, 2002).

Literature written for children is fraught with political meaning because it is "a product of the social order within which it arises and as a rule expresses, consciously or unconsciously, its dominant social, political, ethical, and moral values" of race, sex, and class oppression. Children's burgeoning understanding of society's expectations and behavioral norms is built in part by books. Encounters with picture books contribute to their comprehension of the world (Langer, 1995). As children encounter and interpret text and images, the process of envisionment building allows them to make sense of ourselves, of others, and of the world, using their own experiences as a framework. Children's envisionment will therefore ultimately reflect the images of inequality they encounter. To the extent that children's constructed worlds of meaning include stereotypes and examples which reinforce systematic inequality, those children are unlikely to discontinue those

stereotypes and systems of inequality in the real world which they will eventually construct as adults.

Children do not control the selection of books they will look at, read, and/or have read to them. Adults write, illustrate, publish, and sell books for children, and the books they produce reflect the values of the society in which they are created. When that society is a sexist and phallocentric one, children's literature and children's textbooks reflect, as well as perpetuate, those ideas. Such authors manifest delusions of grandeur, delusions that the whiteness of their skin makes them somehow special. The necessity to keep these delusions well nourished, to fortify them against any invasion of reality, makes these people menaces to society ... They wield word-weapons, sometimes overtly, sometimes insidiously, yet they disclaim all responsibility for what they say, being merely objective observers of the human scene, or secretaries transcribing the dialogue of characters over whom they have no control. Furthermore, adults decide which books to give, recommend, and/or read to children. In educational settings, for example, the choice of books to be presented to children contributes to inequality. Children's books are not ideologically neutral, but reflect a variety of significant biases, particularly racism and sexism. Adults' selection of books is therefore a political decision-making process in which the selection of some books results in the exclusion of others, which, needs to be disrupted. The conventional wisdom in teachers' choices of books to read aloud

in classes is to choose books which will attract and hold boys' interest; teachers doing so participate, even if unwittingly, in perpetuating sexism. This practice prioritizes boys, ignores girls' interests, and takes girls' unquestioning acquiescence to their own secondary status for granted.

Aspects of corporately controlled culture, such as movies, video games, and playthings, play an increasingly important role in the construction of childhood. Taken as a whole, the material culture of early childhood is strictly delineated along gendered lines. Artifacts of material culture, such as clothing, hair styles, and colour, communicate to others the gender category to which a child belongs, providing a script for interacting and reacting to her or him. This process simultaneously creates gendered meanings and teaches the child how to behave in culturally appropriate ways (Calvert, 1998). Picture book illustrations provide important evidence of the presence and meanings of material culture.

The aim of the present thesis is to highlight the skewed representation of female characters in certain important seminal works of Children's literature. The argument is that, if these landmark texts, that are so innocently being used for knowledge dissemination among the young and malleable reading minds can be so discriminating and sexist, then care must be taken since they lead to the growth of a biased society that promotes patriarchy and sexism.

The thesis makes a detailed analysis of some pivotal fairy tales and brings out the gender imbalance that is so much prevalent in these tales. Feminists have scrutinized these stories and have brought out much of the phallocentric/misplaced ideologies of these stories. In fact, there have been many rewritings and retellings of these fairy tales. For example, Donald Bethelme's **Snow White** is a postmodern rendering of the classic tale. *My Side of the Story* is a retelling of **Cinderella** from the point of view of the step mother. A collection of stories titled, **Politically Correct Bedtime Stories** reworks these tales into the context of the 21st century and the princesses of these tales are no longer passive and submissive; they are, on the other hand, career-oriented, individualistic and fiercely protective of their liberty. They are, in a sense, a contemporary version of the old classic tales for the contemporary breed of children.

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" (Banerjee, 6). In traditional Indian literature, girl characters were either absent or passive (Jain 2002), 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’ (Trites, 4), a prevalent narrative pattern in many of these novels, it can also 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, 2), a definition that renders some of the texts problematic.

Kashmira Sheth’s **Keeping Corner** provides a particularly clear example of this approach in that it refutes the traditional belief that girls belong contained within the family home by addressing an extreme of this scenario: the case of Brahmin child widows in pre-Independence India. 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 imagines a positive resolution for Leela, who refuses to be constrained by traditional social restrictions on Hindu widows and protests against this unfair treatment. Instead of remaining housebound and dependent, Leela completes her education, supports herself by becoming a teacher, and influences others to see girls and women as 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.

Suchitra in **Suchitra and the Ragpicker** fulfills the heroic role of the new Indian girl by acting to improve her society through empowering other girls to become new Indian girls and by converting or overcoming those who oppose such progress. She not only participates in the project of transforming restriction to empowerment, but actually initiates it.

The researcher ends this thesis with the fond hope that the future of children's literature will be in a direction where it will envisage a non-sexist and genderless society and the individuals of such a society will grow up on a staple of books that highlight such positivism.