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## FEMINIZATION OF THE CONTEMPORARY INDIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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### Abstract

The earlier Indian children's literature, which is now regarded as classics, portrayed an array of male characters and ignored female depiction. Following the influence of the western wave of feminism, emerged a new generation of writers who propagated feminist ideology. A new image of female protagonist is gradually taking shape even in contemporary children's literature in India, where there is representation of girls with agency and power. Ranjit Lal's *The Battle for No. 19.*, set in the background of 1984 Sikh riots - the dark phase of emergency and *The Victory Song* by the postcolonial feminist Divakaruni, set up in the year 1939 India, with the historical background of India's Independence struggle, render voices to their protagonists and also address the derivative roles imposed on women in India. The paper studies gender in the narratives with reference to establishing relation between the gender of the writer and the Indian Feminist Children's Literature. Also, the relation between girls and tradition, social and community roles of girls, the stereotypical representation of non-traditional girls, the interrelations and female sisterhood is analyzed in the light of the narratives. The gendered shades in the narratives help in understanding the Indian scenario of the past and comparing it with the present. The study concludes that the Indian Children's Literature is evolving fast with transforming the traditional girl into the New Indian girl and inclusion of female heroism and gender neutral themes.

**Keywords:** Feminization, Children's Literature, Gender, Indian Children's Literature in English

### Changing Images of Indian Women in Fiction

Literature reflects the life and traditions in correlation to the socio-political scenario and the circumstances existing at a particular time. The images of women portrayed in literature covers a wide spectrum. In the Indian scenario, the women in the Indian scriptures were presented to possess an equal status as men. In the Vedas and the

Upanishads, women were portrayed to be strong and were glorified. They 'were considered as the embodiment of beauty, culture and wisdom' (Hegde 27).

But gradually, men began to exert their dominance over women in all areas including education and literature, bringing a 'halt in the creativity of women' (Hegde 27). As the status of

women was deteriorated, the image of women suffered badly. In the epics like Ramayana (5<sup>th</sup> century BCE) and Mahabharata (8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE), the portrayal of women appeared to be governed by patriarchal norms. Women were drawn to illiteracy, to be victimized by many social evils like polygamy, child-marriage, Sati etc. The weak and the dependent image of women found its place in literature where women characters became insignificant and restricted through their portrayal as supporting wives or mothers.

This subjugated image of women continued for a long time, until finally women began to break the bondages of ignorance and find expression. The western idea of feminism touched India much later, but even before that, women started to question their submissive status. Many women writers emerged on stage writing about the problems of women. The writings of women writers served as a source of inspiration to women to get themselves educated and liberate themselves from the life of inaction and ignorance. During the pre-independence era many social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar stepped forward to uplift the status of women and provide them their honour and self-respect.

As the social conditions changed, the literature too initiated endorsing strong female characters depicting them battling the unjust and restrictive female social environment. These writings represented a plethora of Indian women, both from the rural and urban India, showing the plight of Indian women and their struggles to strike a balance between the Traditional and Modern images of women. S.R. Bhosale classifies the changing images of Indian women in fiction as:

1. Image of Subjugated and Marginalized women.
2. The image of rebellious woman
3. The woman of liberated and emancipated woman
4. New/Modern image of woman
5. Traditional oppressive and sublime woman.
6. Change in the image of girl
7. Change in the image of wife

8. Changing image in the Mother-in-law and Daughter-in-law.
9. Conversion in the image of Mother.
10. Image of Woman as a loyal friend. (Bhosale 1).

Vyomakesisri, who has studied the past and present portrayal of Indian women in literature, notes that, 'the insignificance and oppression of women prior to the mid-19th century is related by the small roles of females in literature. As women gained equality, the heroine continued to change. By studying these changes, it is observed that not only do the characters embody the female identity, but also the heroines transform into the new figures that women aspire to be' (Vyomakesisri 19). The change in the representation of women from traditional, marginalized women to new-age, independent women is the result of the increasing awareness in the society regarding the prejudice against and marginalization of women, which gave rise to the movement of feminism. Feminism in its own manner 'not only influenced real life and culture but also creative literature, literary theory and criticism' (Khan 4). The western feminist literary criticism awakened 'the female identity and the prosperity of the female writers' creations' (Ming & Fan 3). This world feminism was gradually nationalized in Eastern countries, 'because it cannot develop without the influence of its national culture, and is always in tune with national literature' (Ming & Fan 3).

So, following the influence of the western wave of feminism, emerged a new generation of writers with feminist ideology who propagated the female point of view and inspired women to raise their voices against the 'unfair and oppressive patriarchal system' (Khan 4). These revolutionary writers selected 'various themes like their male counterparts, but they (gave) special prominence to the role of women' to reveal, 'various aspects of modern women's feelings and exhibit the fully awakened feminine sensibility and feminist views' (Hegde 61). The changes in the Indian society after Independence gave shape to a new and modern image of woman. The modern woman tried to break the shackles of suppression and conservative traditions which bound the earlier women, to

initiate an independent and carefree life. This changing scenario reflecting the life and culture became very much a part of contemporary literature. Today's modern literature depicts a strong, confident female protagonist who 'refuses to surrender before the conservative forces. She prefers her individual path by challenging the age old social norms' (Bhosale 2).

The earlier Indian children's literature, which is now regarded as classics, portray an array of male characters and ignore female depiction. Sucheta Shinde provides lists from both Indian and Western classics, for example, Indian classics such as stories by Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore (*Kabuliwala*, 157 1892); R.K. Narayan (*Swami and Friends*, 1935, *Malgudi Days*, 1942); Satyajit Ray (*Feluda Series*, 1965 - 1997); Ruskin Bond (*Adventures of Rusty*, 1951- 2012) and Salman Rushdie (*Haroun and Sea of Stories*, 1990). Most popular Western classics read by youngsters in India starting with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719); Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883); Howard Pyle's *The Merry Adventure of Robin hood* (1883); Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), William Golding's *Lord of Flies* (1954); S. E. Hinton's *Outsiders* (1967) till the big series of *Harry Potter* by J. K. Rowling; all of which show how the focus of the novels was only on the experiences of male protagonists. (Shinde 156-157). But the feminist discourse, which shaped the image of the new-age woman has 'the most to offer children's literature by providing a language that can articulate the power relations within poetic language' (Thacker 14). This new image of female protagonist is gradually taking shape even in contemporary children's literature in India, where there is representation of girls with agency and power. Today there is a range of books available in Indian children's literature in English that portray strong female protagonists and their regular everyday struggles in which they become triumphant. So, the Indian scenario is changing to include female heroism and gender neutral themes.

### **Overview of *Victory Song***

Set up in the year 1939 India, with the historical background of India's Independence

struggle, *The Victory Song* is a narrative of courage, hope, love for the motherland and social revolution. It is set up at a time when the struggle for India's independence is acquiring thrust. The protagonist Neela, a 12 year old girl, represents the traditions of rural India but carries the staunch fire of feminism to achieve her goals. The narrative initiates in Shona Gram, a small village in Bengal. The narrative depicts a joyful wedding of Neela's sister Uma, but gives insight into the traditional Indian society where dowry was a required social norm to be fulfilled by the bride's family for their daughter to get married. The subjugation of women in family and culture is evident through the narrative as Uma worries about her life after marriage, where she would have to carry out all the domestic chores and social obligations expected from a daughter-in-law, so as to please the groom's mother and keep all the other family members happy.

Neela's father makes up his mind to possibly get involved in the freedom struggle in Calcutta. When Neela's father does not return for weeks, she realizes that her father might be in some sort of danger as the British, who were unapologetic towards protesters, could jail them, injure them or even kill them. Neela decides to rescue him and so with the help of her friends, and risking her own self, likely to be caught up by the Britishers, finally she is able to free her father and take him back to his family. The narrative is gripping enough to motivate the readers to get engrossed in the life of Neela and get a glimpse of the courage displayed and sacrifices offered for attaining independence. The narrative depicts both joys and perils in the life of Neela and also offers an insight into Indian culture with its richness, practiced traditions and gender roles.

### **Overview of *The Battle for No. 19***

*The Battle for No. 19* is a gripping tale of eight school-girls who are put into disastrous circumstances and have to battle out their physical enemies as well as their inner fears in order to survive. The girls, originally from the hills, were returning from their school tour to Agra and arrive into Delhi unfortunately on the same day when the then Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi is assassinated. Soon, the pleasant trip is transformed

into a bloody spree as their vehicle is attacked by the frenzy driven mob whose only intent is to kill and loot. The girls who are completely aghast by what happened so suddenly, escape and arrive at an old colonial bungalow asking for help, but when no one answers to the door bell, they break in like burglars into the house to take refuge. They explore the magnificent bungalow, which is strangely deserted in a manner suggesting that the residents left in a hurry. They find it abundantly stocked with food and other daily necessity items along with a collection of weaponry of all kinds, including sharp blades, swords, daggers, bows-arrows and also demonic masks. Through the T.V. and Radio they come to know that Smt. Indira Gandhi had been assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards and so the violent mobs are brutally killing the Sikhs all over Delhi. Quickly the girls take charge of the house and divide duties among themselves, but are eager to return to the safe vicinity of their homes. However, troubles follow as they realize that their current hide-out belongs to a rich Sikh family, so they are not safe in the house. Soon, the girls discover that they are not alone in the big house but are accompanied by the two children (brother-sister duo) of the Sikh family, who have been hiding from the violent mob just like them. The girls work in close co-operation and take Puja to be their leader, who though brave and brilliant at her skills of archery, has her own set of personal issues with her father (a Major in the Army) who has always ignored her for being a girl. All the girls and Jogi, the only male child in the group, display exemplary wit and courage to engage in a battle with the rioters. The girls wait for the rioters to come as there is no escape and finally through planning and teamwork, are able to resist most of the bad men. Finally the Indian Army arrives to their rescue but a rioter with scruffy beards takes away Simi as his human shield to flee to the terrace of the house. The climax reveals the skill of the excellent archer Puja who with one smooth shot of her arrow is able to pierce the heart of the rioter to save not only Simi but even her father (Major in the Army) from the gunshot of the rioter. It is then that her father acknowledges the mastery of Puja at archery and realizes that in fact girls can not only be equal but even more capable than boys. Thus, the

narrative establishes the authority of girls battling all odds and features a strong female lead who is inspiring, strong, intelligent, sensitive, caring and thus breaking stereotypes.

### **Gender of the Writer in Indian Feminist Children's Literature**

Establishing a relation between children's literature and women authors, Sunder Rajan in *Fictions of Difference* notes that, "majority of Indian writer's of children's fiction are women, for reasons that undoubtedly have to do with their putative understanding of their child 'sensitivity'" (Rajan 102). It is true that Indian women writers construct narratives positioning girls in central roles, but explaining the connection Mc. Gillis states that in the post-colonial literature there " is a desire for recognition on the part of people who have been either invisible or unfairly constructed or both. The connection with children and women seems inevitable" (McGillis "Introduction" xxi). So, postcolonial narratives are representations of "traditionally silenced members of society" (Superle 38), which offer a chance to Indian writers, especially women writers to render voice to the marginalized and thus contribute to nation-building.

In the context of works by contemporary Indian women writers Superle notes that:

The novels reject traditional construction of girls as passive, dependent, restricted to the domestic sphere, and less valuable to society than boys. Next, Indian women writers both celebrate girls and imagine girlhood as an empowered state by positioning girls and women as part of strong, interconnected webs of family and community relationships. From this cooperative position, girl characters unanimously succeed in achieving transformation by acting with agency to improve their own lives, the lives of people about whom they care, and/or the well-being of their communities according to a liberal value system. However, these new social roles for Indian girls are nearly as prescriptive as traditional roles were, simply with different parameters. (39)

Divakaruni is a postcolonial feminist writer who renders voice to the protagonist Neela in *Victory Song* and also addresses the derivative roles imposed on women in pre-independence India. Nigar Alam, Dr. Archana Durgesh note that the narratives of Divakaruni “illustrate educated, adamant, mentally strong and rebellious female characters who don’t hesitate to liberate themselves from male chauvinism.” (Alam and Durgesh 41). Neela is revolutionary in her views. She has a strong urge to contribute in every manner and be a part of the freedom struggle. When the freedom fighters come to her home during her sister’s wedding, she readily takes off her gold chain and hands it to them, well aware of the fact that she would be reprimanded by her parents, especially her mother for doing so - “Neela bent her head, feeling terribly guilty about the pain and worry she had caused her mother. But what she had done wasn’t wrong, she knew it in her bones. Oh, here was another of those complicated times when duties clashed with each other!” (*Victory Song* 31). Neela does not worry about the chain being a part of her future dowry but is more concerned about the well-being of freedom fighters and thus puts the interest of the nation before her personal self. Divakaruni not only portrays a strong female in the form of Neela- the progressive child protagonist but also in Neela’s mother, who though is traditional in her views is firm-headed and clever. She has a strong say in all the matters concerning household and her decisions are agreed upon by Neela’s father. When discussing about Uma’s wedding, she makes her stand clear by stating her decision, “ ‘We can’t go lower than a hundred people, that much is certain,’ Sharda had said in her firmest tone, the one Neela knew well.” (*Victory Song* 3, 4). Also, when constables rush into her house looking for freedom fighters, she does not get afraid. On the contrary she warns them of consequences and thus astonishes Neela with her bravery at the time of adversity - “ ‘And when you don’t?’ Sharda asked. Neela was amazed that she dared to talk back to the constable. Truly as Panditji had said, she had underestimated her mother. ‘Then you’ll owe us a big apology for disturbing our sleep and for scaring my daughter half to death!’” (*Victory*

*Song* 52). Thus Divakaruni depicts the radical side of the otherwise traditional Neela’s mother.

The female writer Chitra Divakaruni has built the narrative *Victory Song* demonstrating Neela’s resoluteness, but the progressive male writers like Ranjit Lal too “imagine apparently child characters who perform in diverse ways in the process of successfully creating and shaping the ideal Indian nation, their own well-adjusted bicultural identities, and/or their own empowered girlhoods” (Superle 4); as is seen in *The Battle for No.19*. The girls depicted in the narrative are courageous, and possess expertise in specific domains which they use wittingly during their battle with rioters. The boldness and capability of Sheetal in opening locked doors, the interest of Puja in bow and arrows, the mastery of Sangita with electrical things and tools, the love of cooking in Gauri, the good memory and intelligence of Sangita are the characteristics allotted to girls by Ranjit Lal to shatter the stereotypical image of girls to be good only at housework and interested only in dolls and make-up. In the context of gender of the writer of children’s literature:

It is not surprising that Indian women writers imagine girl characters differently than male characters in both India and the diaspora. For example, in the children’s novels of the only two diasporic male writers, Bali Rai and Salman Rushdie, girls and women generally receive less attention than their male counterparts. They are rarely given the central place in male writer’s texts, nor are they usually imagined as new Indian girls. (Superle 48).

However, there are exceptions. Ranjit Lal in *The Battle for No. 19* can be said to have created a space for girl characters in a way which is no less than any female Indian writer could have done. Ranjit Lal has demonstrated the physical, emotional, mental and psychological power of girls through *The Battle for No. 19*. Each of the girls has her own unique aspect of strength that she uses to deal with the rioters and triumph in the dreadful situation. The rioters face a tough time trying to defeat the girls. The girls are not stereotypical representation of

femininity but genuine representation of children trapped in disastrous circumstances, where they show overlapping traits of both masculinity and femininity. The girls are caring, considerate, understanding, timid, weak, fearful (traditional feminine attributes) as well as brave, courageous, strong, powerful, fearless and rational (traditional masculine values) depending on the circumstances and situations they are faced with. The rioters who attack the girls are not prepared for the combat as they expect the girls to be an embodiment of typical feminine traits, which they are able to refute through their actions – “They had been looking forward to tackling a group of weeping, hysterical schoolgirls, who they could silence and squash easily with a slap or a blow. Not this scheming demonic contingent, flinging bucketfuls of boiling water on them” (*The Battle for No. 19* 153). Puja in *The Battle for No. 19* can be seen as a portrayal of a new Indian girl who display a strong sense of self-confidence, strong friendship, leadership skills; thus enabling change in the orthodox views of her father who considered girls as being weak and timid. She is able to display girl-power, applying her skills of archery and intelligence, to evoke sisterhood, combat rioters and thus prove her father wrong. Even Divakaruni in *Victory Song* makes Neela to emerge as a new Indian girl who realizes that she could fulfill her responsibility of a daughter by rescuing her father and also contribute in rescue mission of freedom fighters to fulfill her national role in the freedom struggle.

Thus, deviating from the observations of Superle that “In India, the empowerment of girl characters is almost exclusively the vision of women writers” (48), the Indian writing scenario in context of gender and children’s literature is undergoing change. Today not only the female writers, but even the contemporary male writers are setting examples in society by writing narratives of female heroism, and thus contributing to reforming the social image of girls as weak and timid.

#### **Social/ Community Roles for Girls**

The social roles of Indian girls are transforming in the context of liberal feminism. Gender equality for girls, is one of the most

important feature that is taking central stage in feminist children’s narratives. These narratives, “reject traditional construction of girls as passive, dependent, restricted to the domestic sphere, and less valuable to the society than boys” and instead “celebrate girls and imagine girlhood as an empowered state by positioning girls and women as part of strong, interconnected webs of family and community relationships” (Superle 39). However, Superle finds these new roles heaped on Indian girls are stereotyped and comments that “these new social roles for Indian girls are nearly as prescriptive as traditional roles were, simply with different parameters” (39). But post-independence, India has gradually taken to the path of liberation from the old patriarchal tradition to include the marginalized and unfairly treated. In this sense the contemporary writers have designed, “non-traditional ways of being for their girl characters - ways that position gender equality as their foundation. In doing so, they create a “new Indian girl” character that is present in the majority of contemporary, English-language Indian children’s novels written by women” (Superle 40).

This concept of the “new woman” has also been discussed in *Real and Imagined Women* by Sunder Rajan:

In the contemporary discourse of women in India a significant mode of interpellation and projection can be perceived in the construction of a ‘new’ ‘Indian’ woman. She is ‘new’ in the senses both of having evolved and arrived in response to the times, as well as of being intrinsically ‘modern’ and ‘liberated’. She is ‘Indian’ in the sense of possessing a pan-Indian identity that escapes regional, communal, or linguistic specificities, but does not thereby become ‘westernized’. (Rajan 124)

So, this new image of Indian girl is attributed with many traits. Firstly, this new Indian girl is seen to be “working actively alongside friends and family to help others by ensuring community safety and harmony” and “relate to national agenda” (Superle 39). Neela in *Victory Song*, a visionary in her approach feels greater duty and responsibility

towards the national and community members. When the father proposes for a simple wedding for her sister Uma, Neela thinks that her father is quite right but also respects the feelings of her mother and sister who would be disappointed if a considerably grand wedding was not held for Uma. In contrast with the character of Neela who believes "in the well-being of their community according to the liberal value system" (Superle 39), the mother of Neela is shown to be traditional, burdened by societal norms and pressure. She feels, "But what would people say if the oldest daughter of Hari Charan Sen, the most successful farmer in all of Shona Gram, were married off like a beggar girl, with only a handful of people to wish her well?" (*Victory Song* 3). Neela understands the importance of India's independence and when the freedom fighters come to Uma's wedding to ask for monetary aid, Neela without any second thoughts readily hands them her new gold chain - "She unclasped her new gold chain and put it down carefully on the cloth. It sparkled brilliantly among all other items, clearly the most valuable piece in there. She knew she'd get into a lot of trouble when her mother found out - but surely her father would understand!" (*Victory Song* 24). Thus, Neela exerts her autonomy and partakes her chain without consultation, very much contrary to her sister Uma who takes her husband's permission to give away a piece of her jewellery for a societal cause. When Neela's father asks her to pack a bundle of sweets for the freedom fighters, she does her part without bothering about feminine grace or shyness. She "picked up the hem of her sari - she didn't care what people thought - and ran to the cook" (*Victory Song* 25). The society in those times was not much liberal towards women and older women imposed young girls to learn womanly skills. Matters of national relevance and politics was considered male domain and so, when in the narrative, important matters concerning the freedom struggle are discussed Neela's mother "called her back to the kitchen and gave her a thorough scolding for standing there gawking among the menfolk where she had no cause to be." (*Victory Song* 14). But Neela feels the need to reject stereotypical roles expected from girls, instead she pictures herself in much larger role as a freedom

fighter, proving her worth for the community and nation. Thus, these futuristic and liberal societal roles for girls are reflected through the avant-garde views of Neela.

In *The Battle for No. 19* too, the young girls are seen to be more mature than the demonic mob who choose to kill people indulging in riots. The adults lose their minds and become barbaric but the girls stand to portray the future peace-loving, mature generation who is all set to fulfill the higher agendas for the prosperity of the nation. Puja voices her mind when she tell herself - "Get away from this hideous place and its demon people! Capital of India! A five-thousand-year-old civilization, so quick to lecture the world about its own greatness and belief in ahimsa, and their barbarism! Some progress we've made, some civilizations we've produced, some lessons we've learnt since 1947! Why did adults always, but always, preach one thing and practise exactly the opposite - and think that no one has noticed? Especially us?" (*The Battle for No. 19* 60-61).

Another important trait of the new Indian girl is that she indulges in self-development to contribute actively to the society at large. Trites notes that,

A feminist novel focuses more on the child's or adolescent's development as an individual than on her being inculcated into a prescribed social role. Rather than relying on her family or community to teach her how to continue in the repressed roles that women have so long been forced into, the protagonist of a feminist children's novel will learn from relationships how to take the subject position as a strong and independent person. (Trites 83-84)

*The Battle for No. 19* skillfully highlights the development of each girl's area of expertise. The individual expertise of girls is used in the narrative to gain positive outcome. For example it is made known to the reader that Sheetal is a very bold girl, brave enough even to fight a young leopard to save her puppy. The character of Sangita debunks the traditional notion that girls are not rational or techno savvy, as she "was excellent with anything

mechanical and electrical, and would probably head for engineering of one kind or another" (*The Battle for No. 19* 24). The expertise and love of Gauri for cooking, shows that cooking cannot be just brushed off as a customary duty of females, with no monetary value but can be developed as a full-time profession. The photographic memory and calculative abilities of Seema again question the traditional beliefs that males are good at logics and females are less capable.

The female lead character Puja is not only adept with archery but has strong leadership qualities so much so that all the girls lie their hope on Puja and look up to her at the time of distress. Thus, the girl characters in both the narratives learn that "they are a part of an interconnected web of supportive relationships which can aid both personal growth and individual achievement" (Superle 39) and thus contribute in their own ways to their societies at large.

#### Girls and Tradition

Establishing a relationship between gender and tradition, Superle asserts that female empowerment requires "complex negotiations between gender and tradition" (40). The patriarchal dominance traditionally places women in subordinate roles which create gender inequality. So the writers of today devise the image of a non-traditional Indian girl who projects "modernization-without-westernization" (Rajan 1993: 126). This non-traditional image of girl/woman according to Rajan is "modern and liberated" and not only seen in traditional roles of "wife, mother and homemaker" but is able to strike a balance between "(deep) tradition and (surface) modernity" (Rajan 1993: 126).

These non-traditional Indian girls "honour tradition by working from within and improving family and community relationships. At the same time, they embrace modernity in their fight for gender equality, which they attain by developing themselves through education and by making valuable contributions to public society, outside of the domestic sphere" ( Superle 41). Exploring the links between tradition and relationships, Trites notes:

Mother/daughter relationships take two predominant forms in children's and adolescent novels: those traditional narratives that allow for the daughter to achieve independence from her mother in the classically Oedipal manner that Nancy Friday describes in *My Mother/My Self*, and those less traditional and less Freudian ones that allow the daughter to mature without necessarily breaking from her mother. While the former focuses on the daughters' strength, the latter category, including Pam Conrad's *Prairie Songs* (1985) and Virginia Hamilton's *Plain City* (1993), allows both mothers and daughters to be strong. (Trites 103)

*Victory Song* clearly fits in the latter category and has a sort of Anti-Freudian mother –daughter plot, where Neela achieves her agency but not at the cost of the harmonious mother-daughter relationship. Neela's mother is nurturing but at the same time controlling too. She always complains about Neela, " 'Look at you! Thin as a stick of bamboo from running around so much. And getting darker each day from being out in the sun. No one will want to marry you when time comes. Why can't you be more like Didi, and sit calmly at home with a piece of embroidery, as girls should!'" (*Victory Song* 5). Neela does not entertain herself by indulging in traditional girl activities like sewing, embroidery, making pickles or sweets but on the contrary likes climbing a tree or swimming across the pond. She also is good at reading and writing and is better at it than the other girls of her age. Though her ways are non-traditional, as according to the expectations of the society of her time, she clearly understands the value of tradition. She knows the traditional behavioural expectations from a girl and so does everything on the occasion of her sister's wedding to please her mother – "She tried to make up for her behavior by being extra helpful, fetching and carrying things, and greeting all the guests politely" (*Victory Song* 10). Not only she behaved like a homely girl, but also wore a sari though she felt more comfortable in a frock- "Tomorrow she would be happy enough to get back to her frocks and skirts, to rescuing kites and splashing around with Budhi in



the pond, but tonight she looked forward to sitting among the women and pretending that she was all grown up" (*Victory Song* 18). This points out that Neela was ready to keep up the traditions but would clearly not be bound under restrictions which are illogical or those which deter her self-growth and freedom.

Though the constitution of India grants equal rights and opportunities to all irrespective of gender and caste, the ground reality in society is different and complex. Tradition and religion play a key role in determining gender equations in India. In the Hindu religion, many scriptures which have been followed blindly from generation to generation contribute towards gender inequality and discrimination of females. Specially the "Laws of Manu" or "Manusmriti", from ancient Sanskrit text are considered misogynist by many Indian feminists (Jain 127). According to these laws,

Women must always remain dependent on their male relatives and never seek independence, that education for females is inappropriate, as they are intellectually inferior to males, that women must unquestioningly worship their husband as deities, and ultimately, that "she who controlling her thoughts, speech and acts, violates not her duty towards her lord, dwells with him (after death) in heaven, and in this world is called by the virtuous a faithful (Manu) (Superle 45).

These kind of influences from religious writings make it difficult to eradicate gender discrimination in Indian societies. *The Battle for No. 19* points out the religious practices which may have hindered the archery training of Puja, had she not been an outstanding archer to please and amaze the monk. When the monks from the monastery were competing in archery with each other - "During a break she (Puja) had casually picked up a bow and tossed off three reed arrows in quick succession and crowded them Whock! Whock! Whock! dead in the centre of the small circle of red in the straw bale target, thirty metres away ... A deathly hush fell on the young monks who had seen this, and then the lama had charged out, apoplectic, shouting (most

un-lama-like!) that girls must never, never pick up a bow and arrow, it was inauspicious, the gods would be displeased, but had stopped dead in his tracks, eyes goggling when he had seen where her arrows had gone..." (*The Battle for No. 19* 53). This reflects the bondages of religious beliefs which do not permit girls to train themselves professionally. However, these old traditional beliefs are challenged and overturned as Puja gets trained in archery by the monk who had "subsequently, taken her under his wing despite ancient religious taboos and moral dilemmas (girls should never, never pick up a bow and arrow!), and had helped her 'mind and body be one, connect with only the target only, nothing else" (*The Battle for No. 19* 59).

Sociologist Mitra Bhadra, points out that "all Indian girls regardless of class, caste or region, experience some degree of gender discrimination" (Bhadra 11). Adding to the views of Bhadra, Superle remarks, "while a small minority of urban, middle-class girls, may in reality experience the empowerment, agency, and equality portrayed in contemporary, English-language children's novel, the vast majority of other Indian girls actually face a multitude of obstacles not only to their equality but even to their survival" (Superle 44).

The character of Puja evidences this. Despite being educated and belonging to upper middle class, the girls in urban Indian society are subjected to gender discrimination. Puja's father is clearly never interested in her talent and dismisses the idea of her archery training, as Puja recalls that her father had, "shrugged in that contemptuous, dismissive way of his that had made her heart plummet like a stone in a well, and sneered that nothing would come of this, what was she trying to prove, and Mama had moaned about what people were saying about her catching the bus once a week to the monastery on the other side of the mountain (albeit with Sheetal and Bhim)" (*The Battle for No. 19* 59). This reflects that attitude of parents who do not support girl child to develop her talent and shape her destiny. The society thus, traditionally suppresses girls and does not facilitate their development or provide them with equal opportunities for progress. The traditional outlook of the society is changing for the

better as girls like Puja and Neela rebel or carve ways to empower themselves and attain their goals.

### **Stereotypical Representation of Non-traditional Girls**

Sunder Rajan finds that the representation of the non-traditional woman in the Indian society is problematic. According to him,

The image of the 'new Indian woman' is of course derived primarily from the urban educated middle-class career woman... (It) provide(s) an attractive and desired self-image for women in general, but also provide a normative model of citizenship that is, significantly, now gendered female. (Rajan 1993: 124)

So, this homogenous representation of empowered female serves to undermine and "prevent other versions of Indian womanhood from gaining validation" (Superle 40). Superle observes that "it is primarily urban, middle-class girls who are most likely to gain the empowered status of new Indian girls, whereas girls from rural regions, low-caste groups, or low socio-economic status are either absent from these texts or portrayed as deficient and reliant on new Indian girls to rescue them" (41).

When this generalization is analyzed in the case of *Victory Song*, we find that such argument does not fit. In the case of Neela in *Victory Song*, she is a rural girl, belonging to a middle class family with the mother and other villagers upholding traditional values. She is capable enough to break the bondages and exert agency to rescue her father. She is able to act independently and is revolutionary not only in her thoughts but also in actions - "Why does everyone feel they have to control girls - even after they are married? Why are women expected to sit quietly and silently, embroidering and making pickles, while men get to make all the important decisions and go to all the exciting places? Why can't a girl be a freedom fighter?" (*Victory Song* 30). Neela is brave enough to put her thoughts into actions and plays an important role in the rescue of freedom fighters put in jail by the Britishers.

Contrary to this rural girl is the urban, upper-class girl Bimala who is more educated, fashionable, stylish and bestowed with all the privileges due to the high ranking of her father. Though, she is humble enough to help Neela and Samar secretly, she is really trapped and powerless. She is unable to voice her opinion against her father or act against the thoughts imposed upon her. She does not have the courage to go against her father, though her views are different from his. At one point in the narrative, she feels sorry for herself and complains, " 'I never get to do anything exciting!' " "Samar's right. It would cause a great scandal for my father if I got caught trying to free prisoners that he had sentenced!" (*Victory Song* 97).

Postcolonial feminist Chandra Talpade Mohanty says that the theory of western feminism, when applied in Indian context is problematic. The "Average Third World Woman" image propagated through the ideas of Western feminism does not include the distinctive categories of "class, caste, religion, education level or sexuality" (Mohanty 21). When this idea of western feminism is seen in the light of Indian scenario, two images of Indian girls emerge- one is "the new Indian girl" and another is "an inferior 'Third World girl' figure" where "middle-class new Indian girls, with their agency" are contrasted with the passivity of the "Third World Girls of low class and caste" (Superle 43). Literary critic Viney Kirpal notes that, "Depictions of emancipated girls are restricted to portrayals of girls from the upper/middle classes" (x) and adds that "contemporary literary depictions are progressive in an imitative western way" (Kirpal xii). It is observed that,

Indian women children's writers often perpetuate in their fiction a similar bifurcation between the new Indian girl figure and an inferior 'Third World girl' figure. This may be due to what Shashi Deshpande and others have described as a strong relationship between women's writing in India and the influence of western feminism. (Superle 43)

This kind of "imitative western way" generates a stereotypical image of the New Indian

girl. But Neela breaks this stereotypical image and represents the rural, low socio-economic class girl as transforming into a New Indian girl. Though belonging to a lower economic class, Neela is empowered in the true sense as compared to Bimala and other girls, who are urban, educated and having high economic status. For these urban girls, modernity and feminism does not mean being open minded and educated but being fashionable. Neela remarks to their pathetic mind-set and pseudo feminism as, "Most of them were enrolled in women's colleges, but Neela thought they seemed less interested in books than in landing rich husbands. Why, she thought in surprise as she listened to them heatedly discussing a new hairstyle they'd seen in a British magazine, even I know more about the world than they do! I wonder if Bimala would have been like that, too, if Samar hadn't made her realize that there was much more to life than fancy jewellery and French perfume" (*Victory Song* 99).

Also *The Battle for No. 19* presents us with the girls from the hills who cannot be said to have an urban background but are quite progressive and non-traditional. Puja does not get the much needed support from her parents but still pursues her passion for archery and displays an indomitable spirit to prove herself to her father. She is keen to train in archery but she recalls her father's cold behavior - "'What? Archery? What the hell for?' had been Papa's response - and what are you trying to prove? - though he didn't say that. 'Go if you want to but take someone along'. Then he had promptly forgotten all about it, never once bothering to ask her how she was getting along, let alone watch her practise in the terraced maize field above the house" (*The Battle For No. 19* 90-91). Thus, the characters of Puja and Neela are not stereotypically represented in a westernized manner and truly capture the reality of the New Indian girls who have the fire within them to accomplish their goals.

#### **Interrelationships and Female Sisterhood**

Networks between females are a strong focus in feminist children's novels. Females have been depicted as nurturers of strong familial and community bonds. But this does not refute the fact

that maintaining "interrelationships is not genetically linked to sex" (Trites 80) and there are equally competent male nurturers who are able to develop effective community and family bonds as do females. But as Trites says, many novelists of children's literature use this "common conception of women strengthening each other with relationships as a focal point" and thus "embrace the positively aspects of stereotypes about females to use them to their advantage" (80). When women indulge in community relationships, it also symbolizes their power to exercise agency and subjectivity. By portraying females as being nurturing, sensitive and supportive, the feminist children's novels bring these characteristics often associated with females in positive light.

All the girls in *The Battle for No. 19* are caring, sensitive and loving; especially the elder girls Puja and Sheetal act as a mother figure to the younger kids. Simi, the youngest of the kids, feels safe in the presence of Sheetal and Puja rescues Simi from the hands of the rioter when he was just about to hurt her. The girls are sensitive, cooperative and maintain nurturing interrelationships and emotional intimacy with each other. The narrative thus demonstrates strong female friendships which take the form of sisterhood. This is supported by Carol Gilligan who feels that men and women have different ways of maintaining community interrelationships. She writes:

In view of the evidence that women perceive and construe social reality differently from men and that these differences center around experiences of attachment and separation, life transitions that invariably engage these experiences can be expected to involve women in a distinctive way. And because women's sense of integrity appears to be entwined with an ethic of care, so that to see themselves as women is to see themselves in a relationship of connection, the major transitions in women's lives would seem to involve changes in the understanding and activities of care. (Gilligan 171)

According to Judith Butler, “people are constructed into their gender roles by what they learn about “performing” their gender from societal influences (Butler 139)” (Trites 81). This brings out the assertion that gender roles are not biologically constructed and so men too are proficient of maintaining strong nurturing bonds and also the male writers are able to depict such relations in their writings. *The Battle for No. 19* not only depicts the girls as sensitive and caring but also the male figure Kartar Singh as being emotional, compassionate and nurturing to the point that he shouts to the girls to escape even when he is being brutally murdered, “Kartar Singh - was screaming like a schoolgirl - like one of them, as the knives went in and out and the blood began gushing down his head and face, dyeing his snowy beard scarlet ...But still screaming, ‘Get out...run! Run! Go!’” (*The Battle for No. 19* 8-9). The male child Jogi too is protective towards his little sister Simi and had taken good care of her and safely hid her all the while from the mob. In *Victory Song*, Neela’s father is kind and loving person who cares not only for his own family but also for the nation. He affectionately confides in Neela when he leaves for Calcutta to join the freedom struggle - “Then he put his hand on Neela’s shoulder. ‘But I told you because I feel I can trust you to help your mother, take care of things, and keep my secret.’” (*Victory Song* 38). Thus, males too are considerate and emotional.

About the importance of interrelationships in children’s literature, Trites remarks that children are socialized through the interrelationships and friendships depicted in the narratives. She tells us that, “Some feminists have incorporated the strengths of traditional femininity into politics (is) by continuing to embrace the importance of interpersonal relationships, so that feminist children’s novels often focus on network of relationships and how human interdependency can succor the child, but without necessarily requiring her to grow up and be a mother” (Trites 83). *Victory Song* has interrelationship developed by Neela at its centre, as these relations aid Neela to achieve her objective. The friendship between Samar and Neela, and between Neela and Bimala are the foundations to Neela’s success to rescue her father. Without

Samar’s help, Neela would not have been able to manage herself in a big city like Calcutta. It is Samar who provides her Bimala’s address in Calcutta where she could stay and search for her father. The friendship and affection between Neela and Samar is known through the unexpressed feelings of Neela- “Neela was furious with herself. Now she’d never get a chance to tell him what she wanted to say: How he’d been her truest friend and had comforted her in moments of fear. How he’d helped her grow, so that she was returning to village a stronger person. And finally - how much she liked him!” (*Victory Song* 128-129). Even Bimala aids Neela in every way possible and a strong sisterly bond is established between them. She uses all her connections and sources to find out about Neela’s father, consoles her in anxieties and supports her till the final phase in the search and rescue mission. Though she is not allowed to keep any connection with the freedom fighters and such other events associated with freedom struggle, she goes out of the way and against her father’s directions to help Neela. She keeps the identity of Neela hidden from her father and manages to make Neela establish contact with the freedom fighters and her father. Thus, the sisterhood of Neela and Bimala teach Neela, “how to take the subject position as a strong and independent person” (Trites 84). In *The Battle for No. 19*, the girls with their interdependency, combined wit and strengths are able to defeat the rioters and thus save themselves. Trites notes that,

Some feminine and adolescent novels focus on community as a general concept important to children of both genders; others focus on strong females within heterosexual relationships; and still others work actively to advocate the strengthening of female bonds between friends, between sisters, and between mothers and daughters. But whichever of these foci a feminist text takes, its child or adolescent protagonist is likely to assume a subject position that allows her or him to value community without sacrificing his or her selfhood. (84)

Thus, in *Victory Song*, the strong bond between both the genders in the form of Neela and Samar is the focus, while in *The Battle for No. 19*, the

sisterhood and strong female bonds of friendship between girls of different age, caste and diverse backgrounds is focused. Though both these narratives may differently depict heterosexual relationships or strong sisterhood, both the narratives take its child or adolescent protagonist to assume agency and exhibit their self.

There is depiction of strong female bonds in children's narratives but as Trites points out, "they (female bonds) are often depicted as being less important than heterosexual relationship" (91). However, in feminists children's narratives these female bonding is a vital source of strength for the protagonist. This female bonding "takes place in friendships, real or surrogate sisterhoods, lesbian relationships or mother/daughter relationships, its purpose in these texts is to explore female relationships as a metaphor for community. And within the metaphorical community, female protagonists are free to explore their subjectivity and engage their agency and their voices" (Trites 92)

*The Battle for No. 19* can be taken a vital narrative exploring the strength and value of female bonds. The girls discover their internal agency and manage to give a tough fight to the blood hungry mob only through collective wit and strong cooperation. The narrative explores the equations between the different personalities of the girls and how they are able to motivate and influence each other. Puja is placed at the centre of the strong friendships, who like a leader guides and directs the others in all difficult circumstances - "So everyone knows the plan?" she asked. 'Seema and I will be one team, and Sheetal and Sangita will be the second. Sheetal and I will attack and take the second rounds from Seema and Sangita. We will hand the empties to Gauri and Jaya who will run back and fetch the reloads from Payal and Jogi and hand them to Seema and Sangita, who will hand them to us. Ritika will mind Simi'" (*The Battle for No. 19* 146). Puja, though a strong leader has her own set of problems which relate to the differences and equations with the father. But she grows and matures out of her fears and gains authority so much so that even her father realizes her value. Her father who had always despised her for being a girl, comes to understand her worth and changes his point of view coming

across her bravery and vigour. Puja develops and finds her inner strengths as she had nurturing female bonds which helped her to grow and flourish. Thus, the strong sense of camaraderie between the girls helps them to overcome difficult situations. The narrative thus explores the friendships which turn into sisterhoods and play a pivotal role in conveying the message of gender equality and feminism.

### **Conclusion**

The study of a researcher Sucheta Shinde regarding gender roles conducted on a sample of 210 short stories and 35 novels published between the years 2010-2015 by selected publishers of Young Adult Literature in India reveal that gender distribution in central characters of YA short stories is not equal. As the frequency of masculine gendered central characters is maximum, the masculine gendered central characters are more dominant in comparison with other gendered characters in YA short stories. (Shinde178). Further, the findings, based on the data analysis reveal the fact that though there is a slight difference between the ratio of masculine and feminine gendered titles, in the field of representation as central characters, boys still outnumber girls as protagonists in the selected short stories. (Shinde 198)

The narrative *Victory Song* with reference to Indian independence struggle, focuses on the questions regarding the status of women in the Indian society and how the same stereotypical roles allotted to them are treated as accepted norms. Any deviation from the traditional gender roles is unacceptable and is considered a threat. These gendered shades in the narrative help in understanding the Indian scenario of the past and comparing it with the present. The present Indian scenario is evolving and the traditional women are transforming into New Indian women, along with the blend of traditional and modern values. So, the narrative can be taken as a feminist attempt to restore the lost voice of Indian women and bring back their glory. Superle considers female representation in dominative roles as 'a disproportionate representation in a culture that has traditionally valued boys more highly than girls' and adds that 'it may be due to the fact that these

texts are primarily written by women' (38). However, it is necessary to note that the Indian society is changing fast, where girls are taking control in every field of life, and so the representation of girls in central roles, though seemingly idealistic, is appropriate and in keeping with the changing new Indian scenario.

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