INTRODUCTION

Context

Children’s literature forms a major part of literature in India. A lot of research work has been done in Western countries on children’s literature from various aspects, but unfortunately, in India, children’s literature has not been researched adequately. “In India”, points out Prema Srinivasan in the preface of her book, *Children’s Fiction in English in India: Trends and Motifs* (1995), “criticism of children’s fiction has been generally confined to reviews in magazines and Sunday issues of newspapers.” She further comments that instances of children’s books being taken up for academic research are few, therefore, the work done by Western scholars and academics often serve as models of criticism (xi). However, there is a growing awareness about the significance of inclusive literature for children in contemporary India. The present research aims at exploring a wide area of the relatively unexplored domain of children’s literature in India.

Children’s books have a long history around the world, and they have absorbed in themselves elements of folk and fairy tales and the oral tradition (Hunt, *Understanding Children's Literature* 5). Children’s literature in India also has a rich heritage of ancient oral narratives like myths, legends, fables and folktales which has continued to influence the contemporary books for children. This traditional literature still occupies a central place in the form of retellings and adaptations in both print and visual media for children. One of the prominent scholars in the field of Indian children’s literature, Navin Menon, points
out in his article, “Historical Survey of Children’s Literature” that “Every publisher looking for material to publish draws upon this unquestioned resource material so that the Indian epics, ancient lore, classical tales, folk tales, the *Panchatantra* form the bulk of children’s literature today” (24). Despite the fact that Indian children have many different first languages, they are culturally united by several pan-Indian narratives, including the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, and the *Panchatantra*, which have been translated into almost all the Indian languages, with which, “… practically all Indian children, regardless of their creed or regional culture, are familiar…” (Agarwal 2; Superley 20).

Heike Wrenn claims in his article, “The Woman in Modernism” that “for centuries, women were defined by men; the world was male-centered and male-dominated,” which is reflected in the traditional literature (9). Most of the traditional literature was written mainly by men from men’s point of view, such as *Panchatantra* written by Vishnu Sharma, *Hitopdesha* by Narayan Pandit, *Katha Sarit Sagara* by Somdeva, to name a few. Most of these stories are dominated by male-oriented themes, characters and views. Women have almost negligible or negative representation in many of these texts for children. Manjari Singh points out in her article, “Gender Issues in Children’s Literature” that, the manner in which genders are represented in children’s literature impacts children’s attitudes and perceptions of gender appropriate behaviour in society. She further elaborates that “Sexism in literature can be so insidious that it quietly conditions boys and girls to accept the way they see and read the world, thus reinforcing gender images” (2). Hence, there is a need to re-read and re-interpret these texts examining the depiction of women in them.
One of the chief exponents of children’s literature in India and the Former Secretary General of IBBY (International Board on Books for Young People) India, Manorama Jafa brings up the following observations:

The present day children’s literature in India in all languages continues to draw largely on the traditional literature… The value system that dominated the themes was oriented to the upper class, contemptuous of women other than the traditional roles like mother, wife and daughter. The male-oriented stories with adult themes dominated the theme. Child’s perspective is totally missing (“Children’s Literature in India”, 34).

The present research will investigate and analyze traditional tales retold to children of all ages as well as stories with contemporary themes in order to understand whether the depiction of women has changed in recent years and if so, in what manner. Thus the aim of this research is to determine the ways in which children’s literature in India captures the image of women.

**Defining Children’s Literature**

Defining children’s literature initially seems simple, that is, literature for children. However, it is a difficult task as one of the key problems of defining children’s literature is that adults and children’s literature constantly overlap each other. Various scholars and critics have attempted to define children’s literature in various ways. Peter Hunt, one of the prominent critics of children’s literature, has commented in his article “Introduction: The World of Children’s Studies” that defining children’s literature is so overdone that “…oceans of ink have been spilt on this matter” (Understanding Children’s Literature 4). However, it should be noted that there is no single fixed definition of children’s literature.
Peter Hunt has defined it as a category that subsumes any text (written, spoken, visual) intended for children. As stated by him, “All definitions rely on their purpose, and so the broadest definition of Children’s literature — any text read by any child — is of little practical value” as this would include every text read by children (Hunt, “Children’s Literature” 42).

Kimberley Reynolds gives a general definition of children’s literature in *Children’s Literature: A Short Introduction*, as “The material written to be read by children and young people, published by children’s publishers, and stalked and shelved in the children’s and/or young adult sections of the libraries and bookshops” (1). Nancy Anderson defines children’s literature in her book *Elementary Children’s Literature: Infancy through Age 13* as all books written for children “… excluding works such as comic books, joke books, cartoon books and non-fiction works that are not intended to be read from front to back, such as dictionaries and encyclopaedias and other reference material” (Anderson 2).

One of the most extensive and widely referred definitions of children’s literature is by Miles MacDowell in her book *Fiction for Children and Adults: Some Essential Differences* (1973) where she defines children’s literature by its characteristics:

Children’s books are generally shorter; they tend to favour an active rather than passive treatment, with dialogue and incidents rather than description and introspection; child protagonists are the rule; conventions are much used; the story develops within a clear-cut moral schematization which much adult fiction ignores; children’s books tend to be optimistic rather than
depressive; language is child-oriented; plots are of distinct order (Hunt, “Children’s Literature” 33).

However, one of the most striking definitions is put forward by Perry Nodelman in his book *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children’s Literature*, where he claims that “A defining characteristic of children’s literature is that it intends to teach what it means for girls to be girls and boys to be boys” (Hunt, 43). This clearly states the reason behind the categorization of children’s books produced separately for boys and girls.

Broadly speaking, children’s literature is a combination of the written text and illustrations produced in order to entertain or instruct young people. In simple words, children’s literature can be defined as literature created exclusively for children. To demonstrate a reasonable working definition, the researcher has adopted the definition by Deepa Agarwal where she observes that children’s literature “lies at the heart of its endeavor: it is a category of books the existence of which absolutely depends on supposed relationships with a particular reading audience: children” (“Yong Adult Literature in India”). Children’s literature rests on three basic criteria: the first is the child protagonist; the second is the simple theme and the third is its aim of teaching moral lessons. These major criteria form the major characteristics of children’s literature.

**Distinctive Characteristics of Children’s Literature:**

Children’s books differ from other literary works because they mostly revolve around the child protagonist. Books for small children are always written in very simple language; they use large prints and also have a lot of illustrations. Books for older children use intricate language, normal font and fewer illustrations. Illustrations are one of the most
important elements in a children’s book. Eminent Indian illustrator, Subir Roy explains the significance of illustrations in an article, “Children’s Book Illustrations in India” as:

Illustrations in a children’s book serve as a visual bridge that takes the child into the kingdom of the main story. Illustrations can entertain, educate, create a dream world for the child, build up the mood of the story, open up the aesthetic eyes of the child and provide the information clearly and graphically (116).

One of the notable scholars of children’s literature, Prema Srinivasan has talked about some of the distinct characteristics of children’s stories such as “… recurrent plot elements, greater flexibility of narrative events and the presence of child protagonists.” She further observes that “Characters in children’s books tend to be slightly larger than life, more colourful and romantic than normal people. The recurrent themes in children’s literature are quest motif and adventure” (6).

Another recurrent characteristic is repetition which is a common element used to emphasize the important messages given in the text. It occurs recurrently in traditional folk tales and fairy tales as well as in nursery rhymes for children. Didacticism is a part and parcel of children’s literary history. Since ancient times, one of the major functions of children’s literature is to teach and instruct children. Another pertinent feature of children’s literature is optimism. Traditionally, most of the stories for children end with “happily ever after”. This optimistic perspective is a major part of children’s story. Stories play a powerful role in shaping children’s thinking and helping them to understand their surroundings. As Kimberley Reynolds rightly claims, “Stories are key sources of the
images, vocabularies, attitudes, structures, and explanations … which can be important carriers of information about changes in culture, present and past” (4).

There has been a tremendous surge of themes and presentation in the children’s literature—both traditional and contemporary books for children in India. As Prema Srinivasan rightly states, in this era of multicultural writing, there are books for every kind of reader. She explains, “Fiction based on a wide variety of themes is being written for children ranging from adventure, fantasy, myth retold and historical and biographical fiction” (15). The genre contains a wide range of books, including recognized classics of children’s books, picture books and easy to read stories written exclusively for children, fairy tales, fables, folk songs, poems and other literature meant for readers in the age group of three to sixteen, which make it difficult to classify in one particular manner (Fadiman 1).

Classification of Children’s Literature in India

Children’s literature can be divided in various ways, such as by genre and age category. Nancy Anderson has categorized children’s literature in six major categories based on genre in her book *Elementary Children’s Literature: Infancy through Age 13* (2012). These categories are:

1. Picture books which include board books, concept books meant to teach alphabet or counting, pattern books, and wordless books.

2. Traditional literature consisting of …. Folktales, which convey the legends, customs, superstitions, and beliefs of people in past times, this large genre,
having (sic.) the propensity for getting broken down into sub-genres such as: myths, fables, ballads, folk music, legends, and fairy tales.

3. Fiction, including the sub-genres of fantasy and realistic fiction and the school story.


5. Biography, including an autobiography.

6. Poetry and verse.

The additional classification of children’s literature according to the age category of the reader in the Indian context has been brought out in the *Bibliography of Children’s Books published in India* by Children’s Book Trust (CBT), India in 1983. It has classified children’s literature into three sections: under five, five to eleven, and eleven to sixteen-year-old (Srinivasan 10).

With the help of both of these categories, the present research has classified children’s books based on the two guidelines—children’s books based on the genre and those based on the age of the reader. The classification is as follows:

(I) Children’s literature categorized by Genre:

1. Picture books—wordless picture books, picture story books, value teaching picture books

2. Chapter books—early reader and easy reader chapter books with traditional stories as well as contemporary themes.

3. Young Adult fiction—based on urban setting and rural setting.
Children’s literature categorized by the Age of the Reader:

1. Picture books appropriate for pre-readers, age ranging from 3-6 years.

2. Chapter books: early reader books recommended for the children of 7 to 9 age group, whereas Easy reader chapter books appropriate for children of ages ranging from 9 to 12 years.

3. Young Adult fiction appropriate for children of 12 to 16 years.

The criteria for such divisions are not fixed and books near borderline may be classified in both the categories. The division of chapters of the present thesis is also based on the above categories.

Scenario of Children’s Literature in English in India

Manorama Jafa has explained the influence of traditional stories on children’s literature scenario in her article, “Children’s Literature in India” which appeared in the book Telling Tales edited by Amit Dasgupta in 1995. According to her, in children’s literature in India, the stories picked up from adult literature had two main sources, one was the abundant treasure of Sanskrit literature; the stories from the Panchatantra and the Hitopdesha were translated; the Ramayana and the Mahabharata were retold to children of all ages by various authors. The other source was Western literature; Aesop’s fables were translated into Indian languages from their English translations; Gulliver’s travels, Robinson Crusoe, Lewis Carroll, Hans Christian Anderson, etc. were translated, not necessarily in the language suitable for children, but because of their content they were accepted as children’s literature (33-5).
The history of modern children’s literature in India is recorded in *The Continuum Encyclopaedia of Children’s Literature*, edited by Bernice E. Cullinan and Diane Goetz Pearson in 2001, which include the following information about the beginning of children’s literature in India:

The non-traditional modern children’s literature originated from the early or mid-nineteenth century as a result of Christian missionary literary and pedagogy activity. Mary Frere, daughter of the British Governor of Bombay published a collection of Indian folk tales in English titled *Old Deccan Days; or Hindoo Fairy Tales* in 1868. It was followed by a few more Western writers translating Indian fables in English, such as Flora Annie translating *Wide Awake Stories* in 1884, Joseph Jacob’s *Indian Fairy Tales* in 1892. The celebrated Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore’s poetry for children *Paper Boat* (1892) is available today in English. Dhan Gopal Mukherjee, residing in the U.S. was winner of the most prestigious Newbery Medal Award for the distinguished author of children’s book published in the USA in 1928 for his children’s book *Gay Neck* (401).

One of the scholars of children’s literature in India, Mohini Rao has taken a brief overview of children’s literature in Indian regional languages translated into English in an article, “Children’s Books in India: An Overview” published in *Telling Tales* in 1995. In her opinion, among Indian languages Bangla undoubtedly stands out in the field of children’s literature. Starting with Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar’s *Betal Panchbinshati* (1847) and *Kothamala* (1856), Upendrakishor Ray Chaudhury’s *Chheleder Ramayan* (1907) and *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* (1914), Sukumar Ray’s poems, Rabindranath
Tagore’s *Kabuliwala* and other stories for children to several stories by eminent contemporary authors like Satyajit Ray, Mahashweta Devi, Leela Majumdar and Ashapurna Devi that are well known to children all over India. Mohini Rao also takes into account the excellent contribution by Marathi authors to the field of children’s literature in India, such as Sane Guruji’s *Shyamchi Aai*, N. D. Tamhankar’s *Gotya* and B. R. Bhagwat’s *Faster Fenne* (Rao 71)—all these popular books are available in English along with recently published books as Dilip Prabhavalkar’s *Bokya Satbande* and Sahitya Akademi Award-winning author Madhuri Purandare’s *Yash Series* and *Radha Series* published in 2013.

Manorama Jafa also has discussed the valuable contribution of regional authors to children’s literature like Gijubhai Badeka in Gujarati, K.P. Kesava Menon in Malayalam, Al Valliappa and Kalvi Gopalkrishnan in Tamil, Syed Imtiaz Ali in Urdu (38). Kerala and Orissa have State Institutes of Children’s Literature that contribute tremendously towards the promotion of children’s literature.

Several contemporary Indian authors started writing in English for young readers in the twentieth century, few notable books are— R.K. Narayan’s *Swami and Friends* (1935), Ruskin Bond’s *The Room on the Roof* (1956), Satyajit Ray’s *Feluda Series* (1965), Anita Desai’s *The Village by the Sea* (1982), Madhur Jaffrey’s *Seasons of Splendour: Tales, Myths and Legends of India* (1985), Salman Rushdie’s *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) and Sigrun Srivastav’s *Heroes Never Die* (1992). These were some of the major contributors in the field of children’s literature in India.

Along with these evergreen books, there is a surge of variety of books for children by publishers in India. John Rowe Townsend, children’s author and critic has remarked
that “The only practical definition of children’s book today… is a book which appears on
the list of children’s publications” (Reynolds 28). Manorama Jafa upholds the publishers
of English books than those in Indian languages when she points out that the children’s
books in English are far more superior in quality of writing, illustration, book design and
overall production. English language publishers in India encourage creative and original
writing much more than the publishers in Indian languages. Today, forty percent of
children’s books are published in English language (Jafa 39).

Navin Menon, in his article, “Children’s Literature in India: The Changing Trends”
(1995) has given a review of the major contribution by publishers of children’s books in
India after Independence. According to him, as far as exclusive books for children in
English are concerned, it was the renowned cartoonist K. Shankar Pillai—popularly known
as Shankar— who pioneered the movement with the foundation of Children’s Book Trust
(CBT) in India in 1957. After spreading awareness for the need for children’s books, more
Indian publishers entered in the field of children’s literature.

National Book Trust (NBT), established in 1957 to promote books in India, is an
autonomous organization under the Department of Education, Ministry of Human
Resource Development and is the only organization in the country which publishes
children’s books simultaneously in 13 languages including English, under the series Nehru
Bal Pustakalaya. These books cater to four age groups — pre-school, 6-8, 8-11 and 11-14.

One of the country’s largest publishing and book selling Government enterprises,
the Publication Division, brings out illustrated and authentic publications on a wide
spectrum of subjects ranging from art and culture, travel and tourism, books on history,
science and general references, have added a children’s book section with short stories,
biographies, folktales, epics and history for children. The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) which is mainly textbook publisher has now started printing some informative books and picture books as well. Another such institute, Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children (AWIC), founded by K. Shankar Pillai in 1981, is a voluntary organization working towards the promotion and development of children’s literature in India. It has been the Indian section of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) since 1990.

India Book House (IBH), has been publishing children’s books in large numbers since 1963, has been in the forefront of Indian publishing of children’s books for decades. IBH’s Cheeta and Chimpu series for children culminated in the launch of very popular Amar Chitra Katha edited by Anant Pai based on stories from Indian mythology, folklore and history. Similarly, Vikas Publishing House, established in 1969, is a leading name in higher education which has been specialized in the publication of academic and reference books.

Among the older publishers, Ratna Sagar Pvt. Ltd. publish a wide range of books for children, from concept books for pre-school children with books on science, environmental studies, history, general knowledge and rhymes. In 1992, Penguin India entered the market with their children’s segment Puffin India; whereas Rupa and Co., started with a new imprint — Indus Peacock. Wilco Picture library by the Wilco Publishing House, Mumbai publishes mostly traditional stories for easy readers.

Talking about recently active publishers in the field of children’s literature, Tulika, Katha, Tara, Pratham, Zubaan, Eklavya, Karadi Tales, Scholastic India and a few others
have made their mark in the publishing scenario of children’s literature in India. Pratham books, a not-for-profit publisher, was founded with a mission of ‘putting a book in every child’s hand’. Established in Mumbai in 1994 to provide pre-school education to children in the slums, it has now activities and publications in twenty-one states and eighteen Indian languages. Story Weaver is an initiative from Pratham books that hosts stories in languages from all across India and beyond. Other notable publishing house Tara Books, founded in 1994 by Gita Wolf in Chennai, is bringing out a variety of marginalized voices through picture books for adults as well as children (Catalogue 2011).

Karadi Tales, children’s publishing house based in Chennai began in 1996, is primarily a publisher of audio books and picture books for children. Tulika, an independent publishing house also based in Chennai, was founded in 1996 by Radhika Menon and Sandhya Rao. Tulika’s focus is on picture books for children in English and other Indian languages. Their books offer a range of experiences that are inclusive and representative of different childhoods, of different social milieus, of different cultural contexts (Catalogue 2015). Katha Publishing House is a non-profit organization devoted to publishing translated books from Indian as well as world languages. It was founded by Geetha Dharmarajan, Moontime and Mayil Ravana in 1998. It has been nominated for the world’s most coveted recognition in children’s literature — The Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award. Katha also organizes the Katha Chitrakala Award for excellence in writing and illustrating for children (Catalogue 2013).

Zubaan is a leading independent publishing house based in New Delhi publishing non-sexist, inclusive and diverse books for all age readers. It was set up in 2003 as an imprint of India’s first feminist publishing house, Kali for Women, and continues to publish
books on, for, by and about women in South Asia. Young Zubaan is an imprint of Zubaan Publishing House established for the children’s literature publishing picture books for smaller kids, chapter books for middle-grade readers and cutting-edge fiction for young adults (Catalogue 2015). Duckbill Publishers, a recent venture founded in 2012 by Sayoni Basu and Anushka Ravishankar in Mumbai publishes books for children and young adults on a variety of contemporary subjects.

Out of these publishers, the researcher has selected the children’s books published by the selected publishers who have continued to publish books for all concerned age-groups till 2015.

**Contribution of Scholars in Critical Studies on Children’s Literature in India**

There has been a tremendous increase in children’s literature in India in the recent years, however, there is “a paucity of children’s criticism in India”, affirms Prema Srinivasan in her book, *Children’s Fiction in India: Trends and Motifs* (10). She mentions some of the earlier source material for children’s literature such as *The Children’s literature in Indian Languages* brought out by the Publication Division of Government of India in 1982, which had an in-depth analysis of children’s literary works from fourteen regional languages, including analysis of folk literature and epics; whereas CBT published the *Bibliography of Children’s Books Published* (1983) which was the first of its kind as a useful reference material. The first *Who’s Who of Children’s Literature* (Communications Publications, 1982) edited by Krishna Devsare, and the second *Who’s Who of Children’s Literature* (Indian Council for Child Education, 1985) by Jaiprakash Bharati included in-depth account of modern writers for children in India (Srinivasan 11).

**Critical Approaches to Children’s Literature**

Research in children’s literature, in the previous century, was believed to be less demanding than literature for adults, and therefore, of less value and importance (Thomson-Wohlgemuth 3), however, according to Peter Hunt “Contemporary criticism of children’s literature at its best is eclectic, using new techniques, rereading and remapping old territories, and exploring new one” (*Contemporary Criticism*, 11). Critics of children’s literature have raised some important questions in various types of researches. Most of the criticism has been centred on literary history and social context of children’s literature.

Research in children’s literature has been defined by Galda, Ash and Cullinan in an article, “Children’s Literature” published in *Handbook of Reading Research*, Vol. III, as
“... any systematic enquiry into the nature of children’s literature.” According to them, there are two broad strands of research on children’s texts — literary analysis that examines texts or genres to describe what authors do, and content analysis that examines what text is about. They further explain:

Content analyses in children’s literature research are often based on an understanding of how texts are nested in the social, cultural and political context in which they are both created and read. Current studies explore gender, culture or other social issues, often through the lenses of critical theory in content analysis. Whereas, literary analyses, consider children’s literature as an object of literary criticism and analysis, which reflects a variety of perspectives ranging from structuralist criticism... narrative theory to feminist theory, historical criticism, and reader-response criticism (363).

interdependence between British and North American scholarship, are embodied in the journal *Children’s Literature in Education* in 1970 (Reynolds 42).

Among the first consciously applied theory of children’s literature is psychoanalytical theory. This theory views a text as a revelation of its author’s mind and personality. It is based on the works of Sigmund Freud. In “The Occurrence in Dreams of Materials from Fairy Tales”, Freud notes that fairy tales have such an impact on the mental life of the child that the adult will use them later as screen memories for the experiences of childhood (Hunt, *Encyclopaedia* 131).


One of the groundbreaking contributions in this theory explaining the relationship between children and reading is that of Bruno Bettelheim. In his psychoanalytical book, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1978), he has revealed the true content of fairy tales where he has shown how children may make use of fairy tales to cope up with their baffling emotions: “The importance of both evoking children’s fears in the fiction they read and providing reassurance that they will overcome them is central of the book” (Reynolds 44).

Roberta Seelinger Trites discusses the inclusiveness of psychoanalytical theory in children’s literature in her article, “Psychoanalytic Approaches to Children’s Literature:
Landmarks, Signposts, and Maps” when she focuses on psychoanalytical theory to children’s literature as a fitting example of post-structural theories which include:

… Lacanian theory, with its focus on the relationship between cognitive and emotional development, lends itself naturally to the study of children’s literature. Concepts such as language and literary acquisition, the relationship between self and other, gender identity, and the child’s struggle with authority can all be discussed within the rubric of psychoanalytic theory. Indeed, because children’s literature is by its very nature, so generically dedicated to fostering ego-development, psychoanalytic theory has many exciting things to say to the scholar of children’s literature (Trites 66-7).

Another earlier theory attempted to analyse children’s literature was based on the stylistic studies by Zohar Shavit’s The Poetics of Children’s Literature (1986). The narratological approach to children’s literature was accepted by Barbara Wall in The Narrator’s Voice: The Dilemma of Children’s Fiction (1991), whereas, John Stephens’ Language and Ideology in Children’s Literature applied linguistic theory to children’s literature (Reynolds 45-6).

Another common theory applied to children’s literature is historical criticism which integrates text and socio-historic context. Jacqueline Rose, in her book The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction (1984) suggests a way of looking at children’s literature which invites its inclusion in wider discussion of literature. She expects:
The history of children’s fiction should be written, not in terms of its themes or the content of its stories, but in terms of the relationship to language which different children’s writers establish for the child. How… do these early works present their world to child reader; what are the conditions of participation and entry which they lay down? (Hunt, *Understanding Literature* 58)

Historical research needs “… to recognize the symbolic and cultural meaning of childhood, in present time as well as from the past” emphasizing on the child as the reader of children’s literature (Reynolds, 49).

Given that children’s literature is primarily defined by its readership, the reader-response theory is one of the most frequently attempted critical theories of children’s literature. This theory asserts that a great deal of meaning in a text lies with how the reader responds to it. Michael Benton in his article, “Reader – Response Criticism” published in the Hunt’s *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children’s Literature* claims that the importance of reader-response criticism in the area of children’s literature lies in what it tells us about two fundamental questions, one about literature that “who is the implied child reader inscribed in the text?” and the other is about its young readers that “how do actual child readers respond during the process of reading?” (112). Margaret Meek has also pointed out in her article, “Introduction: Definitions, Themes, Changes, Attitudes” which appeared in Hunt’s *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children’s Literature* that:

In the 1980s and 1990s, critics of children’s literature experimented with the takeover of the whole baggage of critical theory derived from adult literature and tried it for its fit. Most now agree that reading is a sex - coded
and gender-inflected, that writers and artists have become aware that an array of audience beyond the traditional literary elite is becoming readers of all kinds of texts (Meek 10).

One of the most significant theories in children’s literature is that of feminist theory, “… dealing with issues relating to gender and sexual orientation” (Reynolds, 46). Feminism has been defined by bell hooks, in her article, “Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics” as a movement “… to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression” (viii). Feminist criticism examines the ways in which literature reinforces or undermines the oppression of women. Children’s fiction has been one of the focuses of feminist theory right from the beginning of the Second Wave feminism (Paul 116). Kimberley Reynolds comments that initially, in the 1960s and 70s, when gender stereotypes in children’s literature became an issue of hot discussion, the concern was “… representation of girls and how texts tended to adhere to a feminine ideal that disadvantaged them, suggesting girls were less clever, dynamic and capable than boys” (46).

Teya Cherland, in her article, “Female Representation in Children’s Literature”, puts forward the opinion of Ritzer and Goodman that socialist feminism focuses on traditional gender roles in the family structure and the capitalist and patriarchal system in which we live, as a key to women’s inferior position (Cherland 2006). The inferior position assigned to women throughout the history of mankind has been discussed by Simon de Beauvoir in her classic feminist text, The Second Sex (1949), where she points out myths about women and stereotyping of women in literature. In her opinion, “the concept of woman as the Other has been practiced throughout history in the society and women have
been treated as deviant, abnormal and as the second sex” (Haleem 2). She criticizes the fact that women have accepted the roles assigned to the women by the men. She explains:

The woman is shut up in a kitchen or in a boudoir, and astonishment is expressed that her horizon is limited. Her wings are clipped, and it is found deplorable that she cannot fly. Let but the future be opened to her, and she will no longer be compelled to linger in the process (616).

The inferior status of women is further elaborated by Kate Millett in Sexual Politics, as “… a pervasive assent to the prejudice of male superiority which guarantees superior status to the male, inferior to the female” (41). It reflects on the second factor of socialization of both sexes, that of sex-role, which assigns “… domestic service and attendance upon infants to the female, the rest of human achievements, interests and ambitions to the male” (26).

According to Gooden and Gooden, “Gender roles are the behaviours that society teaches are “correct” for boys and girls, and gender stereotypes are often the basis of gender roles” (Meganck, 2). The stereotype is defined by Turner-Bawker as “… general beliefs about categories of individuals which are learned, widely shared, socially validated. While usually inaccurate, they are widely shared as truth and very powerful” (461). Gender stereotypes attributed to women have been discussed by Mary Ellmann in Thinking about Women, where she writes of women as passive, as unable to move to action, in direct opposition to a man’s activity and aggression. According to Ellmann, “women are compliant as submissive daughters and wives, as mothers or whores—they may all share the same sense of submissiveness.” (Savitt)
Stereotypes of women in the role of mother or wife have been further elaborated by J. Savitt in her article, “Female Stereotypes in Literature”. According to her, when the mother is “good”, she is—submissive/totally dependent, supportive, nurturing, comforting, a workhouse, selfless/sacrificing, confined, kind; but when she is “bad”, she is—strict/the disciplinarian, dominating, a nag/shrew/witch-like, nasty/harsh, unattractive/maternally/dull, driven (always behind her husband or her children) (Savitt).

The sex-roles assigned to both the genders are challenged by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*. She argues that the way we perceive gender roles lies at the very root of inequality of the sexes. She further points out that if we deconstruct the society views gender roles, this might lead to changes in political, culture and so improve the status of women (Butler 149).

Beyond gender roles and stereotypical character presentation, there have been some researches that focus on the other aspects of feminist theory to analyze children’s literature such as gender bias. According to the studies by Jett-Simpson and Masland, gender bias exists in the content, language and illustration of a large number of children’s books (Singh, 1). Various studies analysing children’s literature have found out that most of the books are dominated by men characters. For example, from Nilson in 1971 to Turner-Bawker in 1996 (and Ernst in 2005), the scholars have concluded that men characters in children’s books clearly outnumber the women characters in titles, themes and illustrations (Kolan 5).

The root cause of gender bias can be identified in the system of patriarchy. Kate Millett, in her most influential feminist text, *Sexual Politics* (1970), has analyse patriarchy as “… a political institution”. She insists that the word “politics” refers to all “power
structure relationship” and the one between the sexes is a “relationship of dominance and subordinance” which has been largely unexamined (Beechy).

Feminist critical theory is concerned with the role, position and influence of women in a literary text for children. Several studies have examined the ways in which men and women are depicted in children’s literature. The general stereotypes in the books for children are observed by Kimberley Reynolds as:

Books marketed as ‘for girls’ tend to be pink, decorated with fairies for the young or fashion accessories for older girls, and often imply that the readers are interested only in their appearance and being attractive to boys. ‘Boys’ books feature young soldiers or spies or similarly macho characters who display few emotions and concentrate on developing the kinds of physical skills that will allow them to be dominant in most situations. Their pages are filled with fights, machines, scenes of outdoor life, and spectacular bravery (47).

A lot of research has been done on gender issues and depiction of women in children’s literature by Western scholars since the 1960s. For example, a seminal study was undertaken by Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada and Ross in 1972, which showed that women were seriously stereotyped and ignored in most of the literature for young people (Paynter vii). From their study it was found that women characters were generally conspicuous and nameless, depicted in the role of helpers, caretaker or followers. However, men were shown in a variety of roles as shopkeeper, builder, king, prince, fighter, soldier policeman and cook (Crowle 1). Subsequent studies of children’s books by Heinz (1987), Kortenhouse and Demarest (1993), and Turner-Bawker (1996) demonstrated that stereotyping and
representational inequities began to improve in the 1970s, however, Hamilton, Anderson, Broddus and Young (2005) found no additional progress in relative frequency of women characters between 1987 and 2002. (Anderson et al 2005). Joy Worland in his article, “Girls Will Be Girls…and So On” (2008), has commented that while sexism and women’s under-representation continue to decrease in recent books for children, they still exist (42).

Lissa Paul has taken a brief overview of the critical texts dedicated to feminist studies of children’s literature— from the most influential, The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women (1991) by Naomi Wolf, and Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women (1992) by Susan Faludi to a special issue, Feminist Approaches to Children’s Literature of The Journal of Children’s Literature (2002). She further claims that, all these various critical ways of seeing continue to influence the ways in which literature, including children’s literature, is written, read and understood (141).

Beverley Lyon Clark and Margaret R. Higonnet summarize feminist criticism on children’s literature in their book Girls, Boys, Books, Toys: Gender in Children’s Literature and Culture when they point out that feminist criticism of English-language children’s literature has evolved in parallel with British and American feminist criticism. Clark remarked that in the 1970s, when Kate Millett was critiquing the “sexual politics” of Mailer and Miller, feminist critics and social scientists such as Lenore Weitzman were examining the images and gender roles of women and girls in children’s media, including literature; fairy tales came under attack for fostering passive Sleeping Beauties and helpless Snow Whites; picture books were criticised not only for portraying feminine passivity but for vastly under representing women.
Regarding academic research on the depiction of women in children’s literature in India, there is a dearth of published works. Very few experts in the field of children’s literature in India like Manorama Jafa, Nilima Sinha, Prema Srinivasan, Navin Menon, Kamala Bhasin, Deepa Agarwal and a few more have expressed their concerns about these issues.

The present scenario of children’s books in India is heavily influenced by retellings of traditional stories where one can find women depicted in a stereotypical way that is in the secondary role of sacrificing mothers, obedient daughters, supporting sisters, cunning and nagging wives and even as a seductress. However, new realistic themes have been explored in recently published books where women are increasingly getting their rightful place. With the advancement of the publishing houses like Tulika, Tara, Katha and especially Young Zubaan, which has been dedicated to the feminist approach to children’s literature, the scenario of women oriented children’s books is on the increase and is changing in a positive way. Prema Srinivasan comments in her book, *Children’s Fiction in English in India: Trends and Motifs*:

In 1990, the SAARC countries celebrated the “Year of Girl Child” and since then, there has been a spate of writing to protest that women and children have been ‘invisible’ too long, particularly in the under-developed countries. The old fashioned concept of girlhood in India as merely one of ‘learning the mandatory skills of house-holding, cooking and childcare, establishing her place in this primary world’ is vigorously questioned and the girl is portrayed in diverse roles, capable of accomplishing a variety of tasks” (110).
One of the landmark studies in the analysis of children’s books—not literature, but textbooks—from a gender perspective in India has been undertaken by the Department of Women’s Studies of NCERT. The Departmental Report of 2013-14, titled as “Gender Analysis of NCERT Primary textbooks of Classes I to V: Overall Analysis”, documents various efforts undertaken by the Government of India as well as the institutions like NCERT to create and implement gender sensitive curriculum, removing sex-bias from textbooks and training of teachers. The report further clarifies that despite the stated commitment to gender equality in education at the elementary level, the ground realities portray that gender discrimination and disparities which continue to exist in our society, get transmitted in the schooling process. Researches in the context of classroom processes and outdoor class activities have highlighted that gender bias and stereotypes get transmitted consciously or unconsciously by teachers and parents, indelibly impacting the formative years of children, school textbooks and other related material (children’s literature), imbued with the principles of gender harmony and inclusiveness are thus pertinent needs.

The report highlights the gender issues in the various textbooks. The analysis of textbooks had focused on quantitative aspects rather than qualitative by looking into the frequency of representation of women in content, visuals and illustrations. The report concludes with the observation that while the textbooks have attempted to highlight gender concerns, there are elements of stereotypes in some textbooks. Men are shown mainly in a variety of professions whereas women are shown as homemakers, teachers or nurses. In the English textbooks, a large number of characters are men/boys. Animals in different themes of textbooks are gendered. The language used promotes stereotypical
qualities of femininity and masculinity (Report of NCERT, Gender Analysis of NCERT Primary textbooks of Classes I to V 2013-14).

To quote Deborah Cogan Thacker, if children’s literature is given the importance it deserves, “the abstract philosophizing of theory is transformed into a practical and a radical functioning tool” (6). The scholars like Kimberley Reynolds hope that “placing children’s literature studies within well-developed scholarly contexts associated with particular periods, genres, writers, publishing practice and critical approaches” could enhance the status of children’s literature and authors, bringing them in from the periphery of academic study (60).

Research Methodology

Following the path of feminist critics, the present research will continue to map the images of girls and women depicted in children’s literature in India. This will be done by exploring the recurrent themes in the selected children’s texts, such as the stereotypical portrayal of women in the text and illustration, gender bias and gender discrimination against women, suppression and objectification of women, male dominance in patriarchal society, sheer exclusion or under-representation of women in the titles, themes, characters and illustrations of the children’s texts. Also, the positive traits in the depiction of women in the selected texts, if there are any, will be explored. Though the researcher will use some of the basic concepts from feminist theory, the main focus of the present research will be a content analysis through data collection of the selected children’s books in India.

Krippendorf has defined content analysis in his book *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology* as “a research technique for making replicable and valid
inference from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (19). Tekla K. Bekkedal talks about this approach in her article, “Content Analysis of Children’s Books”:

Content analysis offers a sound approach to research on children’s books because it is an objective, systematic, and quantitative method of describing content. The investigator can move away from subjective opinions based on recollections of individual titles to an objective description of contents of a systematically selected group of books (110).

In quantitative approach the researcher begins by suggesting the factors influencing or the beliefs about the research question, for example, in the present research, exploring the depiction of women in children’s literature in India will be the case. Based on the beliefs the researcher applies certain tools or questions, or develops a questionnaire and administers it to a sample of books where women appear in text and illustrations, in titles, themes, characters. Then the researcher analyses the data and identifies the factors or reasons for positive or negative depiction of women in children’s literature in India. Prediction or beliefs are important factors in this approach to find the difference or relationship between the variables examined. Measurement scales are used to categorize and quantify variables. In the present study, gender is an example of a variable that is measured on a nominal scale; individual characters are classified as masculine or feminine gendered characters. In quantitative research, focus is on the figures collected when a test, scale or questionnaire is administered. Numbers are used to explain the phenomena. The main instruments in data collection are the questionnaire, scales, inventory or tests. The
sample should be large enough to be representative of the population. The finding can be generalized from the sample of the population.

In short, content analysis is used to determine the presence of certain words or concepts within the text or a set of texts. Researcher quantifies and analyses the presence, meanings and relationships of such words and concepts, then make inferences about the messages within the text, the writer, the audience and even the culture and time of which these are a part (Weber 9).

The starting point of the quantitative aspect of the present research will be the collection of frequency data of various significant attributes, such as a frequency count of masculine/feminine gendered or neutral or equal representation of both gendered characters in the titles, themes, and central characters, total number of characters and illustrations in selected books for children. The base for data collection will be story books published or reprinted during 2010-2015 by selected publishers for children from age groups of 3 to 16. Close reading of the selected books will be done for the evaluation of the depiction of women characters in them. The texts under study will be analysed, focusing on the four themes: character analysis examining the stereotypical portrayal of women in the texts; patriarchal influence on the theme and characterization; gender bias against women; gender inequality considering under-representation of women characters in titles, themes, central roles, characterization and illustrations.

Gender stereotyping is one of the most prominent issues in many of the children’s books. A stereotype is a generalization of the characteristics and attributes of a certain group based on their gender which usually carries derogatory implications. Most common
gender stereotypes attributed to women are related to the following notions: personality
traits such as women are supposed to be shy, passive and submissive; domestic behaviours
such as women are supposed to cook, do all the housework and raise the children;
occupations such as women are supposed to have jobs such as that of a teacher or nurse;
and physical appearance, such as women are expected to be delicate and weak ("Gender
Stereotypes"). Another concurrent theme is gender bias or sexism that is discrimination
based on gender especially against women. This is associated with the unfair treatment
given to women and gender prejudice. This leads to the theme of patriarchal influence
which refers to male domination and women’s acceptance and internalization of that
dominance. This is reflected in the under-representation of women in books for children.
These four themes as well as the text selection criteria of the same publishers will be the
base for content analyses of all the stories under study.

**Brief Outline of the Research:**

As noted earlier, though there is a tremendous surge in the number of publications
in children’s story books, there is a dearth in the field of children’s literature. Very few
noted scholars are expressing their concerns on various issues related to children’s
literature in India, including the gender issues. However, unlike Western countries, there
are hardly any attempts for the systematic chronological documentation of children’s
literature in India as well as research about the depiction of women in children’s literature
in India. That is the reason the researcher has chosen the content analysis method to
examine the depiction of women in children’s literature in India.
The statistical data analysis will be applied with the aim to check whether there is a dominance of any particular gender in each category of books (picture books, chapter books and YA novels and short stories). For this purpose, statistical test namely, chi-square test of goodness of fit will be used. The test will be applied to titles of picture books, themes in picture books and central characters in picture books (Chapter 1). Similar three tests will be applied for chapter Books (Chapter 2) and three tests for YA books (Chapter 3). With the results from such analysis, the researcher will be able to claim if there is dominance of any particular gendered character in the titles, themes and central characters of picture books, chapter books as well as YA short stories under study.

Along with this statistical analysis, the thematic content analysis of the characters will be done in order to determine the depiction of women in the books. The primary method of this research will be a quantitative and thematic content analysis of a sample of children’s story books in India published by the selected renowned publishers during 2010-15.

The present research will be divided into three chapters. Each chapter starting with the background of the study defining the concept of genre of the book, will take a review of the similar study done in the past, will explain the issues that the study hopes to address and will cover a brief overview of the content analysis method used by the researcher. Each chapter will conclude with the findings and will talk about the limitations and scope for further research in the field of the depiction of women in the selected story books for children. Books, especially picture books for younger children, play a vital role in the early socialization of smaller children. The ways in which women are depicted in Picture books for children in India are examined in the next chapter.