

Our Primary Level Text books and Social Constructs about Gender

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Abstract

Text books are not only an expression of the beliefs of the writers who are a part of a particular social milieu, but also a shaper of the belief system of the coming generations. A reading of the primary school text books of various publications, including NCERT, shows that they seem to be guided by many age old social constructs about gender. 'Social construct' is an idea that seems to be natural and so obvious that it is accepted unquestionably, but, which in fact, may not represent reality, being actually an invention of a given society. In fact 'gender' itself is a social construct. Down the years, gender sensitivity as regards the text books has been limited to an increase in pictorial content depicting women and gender role reversals, but has not questioned the traditional gender power structure.

Keywords: Gender, Milieu, Discrepancy, Self-effacing

This paper intends to present how finely the gender biasness is interwoven in the content of the textbooks and why and how it can be done away with, with a little circumspection. It was during the mid-19th century, the period of Victorian England, when Tennyson wrote in his long poem '*The Princess*'-

'...Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
Man for the sword and for the needle she:
Man with the head and woman with the heart:
Man to command and woman to obey;

All else confusion....'(Part V, lines 427-431)

The poem raised and explored the question of the male- domination in gender relations, both in work area as in lines cited above and, in sexual relationships as in the lines- 'We hunt them for the beauty of their skins;/They love us for it, and we ride them down' (V, 147-50).

The scenario has changed tremendously in the West since then. Changes have not been little even in our part of the world but the moot point is whether the social beliefs have changed to considering the two genders equal (not similar) on a social scale *or, is it only* that woman have taken to some works in professional area, mostly because of economic necessity, which previously were done only by males. Perhaps it is only the latter and the clearest signs can be found in our text books written for our primary school children. Text books are important indicators because they are not only an expression of the beliefs of the writer who himself is a part of a particular social milieu, but also a shaper of the belief system of the coming generations in society. Browsing through the primary school text books of various publications, including NCERT, makes one feel that the age old social constructs about the male being more powerful, both in physic and intellect, and hence the natural decision maker, exist in our society till date and are also being perpetuated through them.

To put it simply, a 'social construct' is an idea or notion that seems to be natural and obvious to people who accept it unquestionably, but, which in fact, may or may not represent reality. Thus it is largely an invention of a given society. In fact 'gender' itself is a social construct. Gender, as distinguished from sex, is the assigning of masculine or feminine behavior and roles based on the genitalia. Some of the social constructs about gender are- girls are feminine i.e. are characterized by being shy, soft spoken, sensitive, self-effacing, compliant, emotional and subjective; boys have masculine traits and are out-going, aggressive, achievement oriented and objective. These constructs become the basis of stereotypes in other fields as well. For instance, in the field of education, it is widely believed that girls are less adept in mathematics vis-à-vis boys, drawn perhaps from the notion that girls are emotional while boys are rational. Similarly, in reference to marital life, it seems to be a given that woman are best suited for household chores while men for works outside the house.

The assigning of softness and emotionality, down the ages, to one of the two genders has automatically resulted in the acquiring of a dominant role by the other gender. It would however be interesting to think over as to why this assigning traverses time and space. Fiona Tolan writes- '*The Second Sex* argued that there was no such thing as 'feminist nature'. There was no physical or psychological reason why women should be inferior to men...Biological differences do not provide a causal explanation for women's oppression, however their reproductive function has placed women at a disadvantage by tying them to the domestic sphere...' (Waugh 321-322). Without going into a debate over the question of the two genders being psychologically or emotionally different from each other, this writer's guess

too is that since it has been the woman who bore child, she automatically got bound within a boundary for rearing and, as a corollary, got stamped over time with the attribute of emotional and a weaker gender vis-à-vis man.

These social constructs can easily be seen to be false if we just observe the world around- a woman laborer giving as much output as a man at a construction site and also taking care of her child, lady scientists in one of the most intellectually demanding organizations as ISRO, ladies climbing high mountains – even an amputee like Arunima Sinha, ladies heading big corporate and; men too breaking down in times of distress, even tough sportsmen as the South Cricket team players on losing a world cup match. But, the question is- can we observe objectively? Perhaps not. The reason is that we all - men and women- have been bred amid gender discriminatory social constructs. Content and images in our text books have only gone to reinforce, unawares, our impressionable minds with the gender stereotypes. No wonder socially prescribed, practiced and believed in gender roles and behavior do not strike us as odd. No wonder statements like, ‘it’s the cow which is tied to a peg, not the bull’, are sometimes issued by the boy’s apologists when his inappropriate behavior towards a girl is asked to be restrained. No wonder, a criminal seems to echo Tennyson’s words cited above when justifying his heinous act of violation of the girl Nirbhaya-“Housework and housekeeping is for girls...’

Besides the typical images of boys playing outdoor games and girls playing with dolls with which our primary school text books are replete with, there are more gender related seemingly innocuous contents, which on a deeper analysis, are not really so. Down the years, gender sensitivity as regards the text books has been limited to an increase in pictorial content depicting women and gender role reversals, *but* has continued situating her within domesticity and, not questioning the traditional gender power structure. A few examples from books published by India’s premier educational organization, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), below will show how finely the gender biasness is interwoven in the content of the textbooks–

1. ‘His mother and sister have to walk a longer distance to fetch water... While walking on the hot sand their feet burn and blisters just cannot be avoided. When the train carrying water comes they are very happy. Madho’s father goes to fetch water in his camel-cart’. (Chapter 20 ‘Drop By Drop’, Environmental Studies book *Looking Around*).

The text above and the picture of ladies trudging to fetch water in this chapter on water conservation reinforces in the young minds that the job of fetching water is of women alone. Moreover, it goes on to assert that, when a man does so (the chapter makes clear that it is ‘not often’) he goes not on foot, but on a cart, , unlike Madho’s ‘mother and sister!

2. The stage directions in chapter 8 of the Hindi textbook for class 3 , *Rimjhim*, for a skit of the famous parable of a monkey eating the whole bread being fought over by two cats are worded thus- ‘ 7-8 *baraskaladkabandar ban saktahai*aur 5-6 *baraskiladkiyaanbilli ban saktihain*.’(a boy of 7-8 years of age can become the monkey and girls of 5-6 years can play the parts of the cats).A dialogue spoken by the monkey is so expressed- “*roti kiski? Mai iskafaisalakaroonga. Chalokachehry, mere peechhepeechheaaoo.*” (Whose bread? I will decide it. Come to the court, come behind me) The stage directions then say- ‘*bandardonno se chheenkar roti apnehaathmeilekarchaltahai, donobilliyaanpeechhe-peechheaatihain*’. (the monkey snatches the bread from both of them and with it in its hands begins to walk while the two cats follow)

The stage directions specifying the gender of the actors for the role of the monkey and the cats, the dialogues and, the accompanying picture of the monkey sitting on a pedestal while the cribbing cats look above to him for justice reinforce the notion of maleness essential for decision making and females given to stupidly fighting over small things.

In both the above examples, a little circumspection could have made the content gender neutral. In the first, the distinction between men and women could have been avoided and, men too could have been shown partaking in the domestic works. In the second, the specifying of gender for role play could have been avoided or even provided that a girl could be the monkey-judge and a boy and a girl can play the roles of the cats.

3. Some of the seemingly innocuous pictures of children playing are like bas-relief in the way they subtly put forth the distinction between the two genders even when the two are shown to be performing the same activity. The chapter ‘ Nobody’s Friends’ in Unit 8 of class 5 English text-book juxtaposes in one picture a girl-child with a doll with a boy-child on a tricycle. Again, a picture of three children playing basketball in Chapter ‘Teamwork’ (page 20) in Class 5 English book shows two boys leaping high in the air, touching the ball while the lone girl’s feet are on the ground, the ball quite beyond her reach.

Besides the NCERT books, which are supposed to set standards for other publications, here are some examples from other reputed publications-

1. In the Social Studies book for class 4, *TREK* (Oxford University Press, 2013),there are five pictures of different seasons being enjoyed by a child and not one is of a girl-child in chapter 6- ‘The Climate of India’. The chapter 8 of this book- ‘Natural Resources’- has a picture of children enjoying themselves in a pond and, all of them are boys. Chapter 7- ‘Organizations that help us’- has five different pictures of various professionals helping us the police, doctor, army personnel, workers in a post office and none of them has a woman Chapter 10- ‘Our Industries’- has a picture of people

working in an automobile industry and all of them are men. *However* there is a chapter, chapter 11- 'Our Heritage'- which has pictures in which there only women, and interestingly they all are depictions of dances of various kinds.

2. The book *Environmental Studies*, Viva Publications, written for class 2 has pictures of 12 professionals in the chapter 11- 'We Need Them'- and none of them has a woman while, in the same chapter, the sub section 'People who entertain us' has the only picture of a woman and, *again interestingly*, it is of a dancer !

The above are only a few samples of the gendered content existing subtly in our primary level textbooks of various reputed publications. These examples give a fair idea of the fact that our text book writers have to get out of the time warp of antiquity as far as the gender constructs are concerned.

In their essay 'Inclusive Education in India: The Struggle for Quality in Consonance with Equity', Nidhi Singal and Roger Jeffery remark that- 'Efforts aimed at developing inclusive education have been largely framed by the distributive paradigm of social justice' (Artiles, Kozleski and Waitoller, 181). The distributive view of justice, as thought of by Rawls, has relevance only to an extent. It is useful in that it focuses on access and provision of resources like free books, uniform, and even bicycles and money sometimes, and thus ensures the availability of basic essentials for education to girls but, it stops short of realizing the roles that are played by social structures and institutional contexts in upholding the gender inequalities. Access does not automatically ensure equality. In fact, if the curriculum and the content are not examined in the light of gender equity, the gender inequalities of socialization and social control will only be perpetuated. As Lewis advises to 'remember the 'education' in inclusive education' (qtd in Artiles, Kozleski and Waitoller, 182), inclusion is not enough in itself and attains worth only with the imparting of an education that helps to create a just and equal society.

We should also remember that it's not only about girls. 'Femininity' cannot exist by itself, therefore masculinity and its effects on boys and men need to be sensitively understood and addressed too. *The Position Paper* of the National Focus Group on Gender Issues in Education expressly says-'Boys and men also suffer from the stereotyping that exists in a patriarchal culture. Boys are discouraged from being emotional, gentle and caring or from admitting to being weak or fearful. They are thrust into the role of breadwinners, protectors, warriors. Most men cannot live up to the notion of hegemonic masculinity. They are ridiculed for being effeminate if they are not aggressive. Gentle boys are pushed around and sexually exploited by stronger, macho men. An excessive emphasis on virility, male sexual prowess and performance leads to tremendous insecurities and anxiety in men.' (NCERT, 24)

What is required is a massive rethink on our definitions, language and concepts to create gender non-discriminatory knowledge for our children. *The Position Paper* of the National Focus Group on Gender Issues in Education suggested construction of 'alternative

gendered frameworks of knowledge that equally reflect the life worlds of both men and women and carry within them the seeds of a just social transformation.’ (NCERT, 32). These alternative frameworks will have to go beyond merely making woman visible in the text books, situating them within domestic boundaries (even while discussing historical figures like Rani Jhansi and Razia Sultan) or, at best, supplementing income of the family in her outdoor life. It also suggests to seek new definitions of ‘strength’ as the existing definitions only lead to a false perception of women being weak. It says-‘Strength is usually measured in terms of who runs faster, jumps higher, carries heavier loads. Physical stamina, thresholds of pain, and longevity, are rarely taken to be indicators of strength.’ The fact is that we have to move even beyond gender and think in terms of intersectionality, i.e. multiple disadvantages of some sections of society, to ensure inclusiveness in our thoughts. Thus, instead of a picture of man mountaineer in the text book, we have to have the picture of that woman amputee mountaineer who successfully climbed Mount Everest.

Learning imparted at the impressionable age of primary schooling remains forever and, it is imbibed both from the texts as well as the images. It is hence, of utmost importance that the material presented before children is such which is empowering for girls in the sense of making them realise their potential, frees the boys from the bondage of stereotype malehood of aggressiveness and curbing of emotions, and thus, raise a generation that is not conformist but critically evaluative and constructive and capable of expanding its capacities to the utmost and contribute to the making of a just and compassionate society.

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