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## Imagining the new Indian girl: representations of Indian girlhood in *Keeping Corner* and *Suchitra and the Ragpicker*

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*[A] series of liberal as well as progressive legislations have been enacted to improve the socio-economic status of girl child [sic]. However, effective enforcement of these laws can be guaranteed only by public awareness and mass pressure to provide her with equal opportunities.*

*The status of girl child is changing mainly due to legislative measures, social development, increasing educational facilities and awareness through media.*

(Bhadra 1999, p.18)

The capacity of young girls to represent a healthy new beginning is nothing new to children's literature. One need look no further, for example, than two classics: Frances Hodgson Burnett harnessed this figure's power with Mary in *The Secret Garden* (1911), as did C. S. Lewis with Lucy in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950). Yet the way young girl characters are positioned in contemporary, English-language Indian children's novels by women writers *does* seem new; these 'new Indian girls' function to represent a modern, postcolonial India in which gender equality is beginning to find a happy home. Setting up a binary which positions societal values from pre-colonial and colonial India as backwards and problematic, these children's novels demonstrate the value of girls in postcolonial India—at least *some* girls, according to some writers.

It is not by accident that the examples of Mary and Lucy, girls who represent positive transformation, are both drawn from British children's literature. Indeed, it is relevant because traditional Indian narratives, folklore, and children's literature from India prior to the 1980s are virtually devoid of girl characters with agency, and Indian children's authors have turned for their inspiration to the British children's literature that so strongly influenced the development of English-language children's literature in India in the aftermath of Independence (1947). This perhaps fraught progeniture provides a convenient symbol for the sometimes problematic figure of the 'new Indian girl' in contemporary, English-language Indian children's novels, for she does not succeed in completely throwing off traditional attitudes from earlier eras, as evidenced by ideological underpinnings in the novels. In fact, vestiges of a colonial sociopolitical hierarchy remain in these postcolonial texts, as a discussion of *Suchitra and the Ragpicker* (2000) by Radha Padmnabhan and *Keeping Corner* (2007) by Kashmira Sheth demonstrates.

Before focussing on the ways in which these two novels position the ‘new Indian girl’, it is necessary to properly introduce this figure. Although this paper examines only two novels in depth, the sample texts that inform my findings are 101 English-language novels focused on Indian childhood: these texts are written by Indian authors living in India, the United Kingdom, and North America, and published for readers aged eight through eighteen, between 1988 and 2008. This English-language fiction has developed only recently and the output is small. Nevertheless, according to postcolonial critic Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, the texts showcase Indian social trends ‘worth noting because they signal change, or the desire for change, in the situation of and attitudes towards children’ (2003, p.101), a point especially pertinent in relation to girlhood and its role in the contemporary Indian nation.

When the new Indian nation was formed in 1947, it became a secular, democratic country that united a wide variety of pre-existing states and kingdoms, and which now borders a vast geographic space. India embraced the principles of liberalism in its national constitution, which came into effect in 1950 and has since then legally extended equal rights and opportunities to every citizen regardless of gender, religion, language, region, or caste—if only in theory. This egalitarian value system differs in many ways from many ancient social hierarchies traditionally at play in India, particularly in relation to the standing of females and members of the untouchable caste in some religious systems. Many powerful and ordinary Indians have, since 1950 (and well before in some cases, such as Gandhi), fought to make justice and equality for all Indians a reality. It cannot be surprising that children’s literature has been enlisted in the struggle: like many national literatures, Indian children’s literature has, since Independence, been employed in the service of nationalist agendas. Gender equality is constitutionally important in the new India, but its achievement has been slow and is nowhere near fully realized for many Indian females. The emergence of the ‘new Indian girl’ figure in English-language Indian children’s literature may well have developed in aid of this quest.

At any rate, it is impossible to ignore a central thread that extends across the majority of the 101 novels: the central role of girl characters. Nearly half of the texts focus on girl protagonists or groups of girls, and of the remainder, the majority feature collective protagonists composed of both boy and girl characters, both of which play significant roles in the narrative. This could be considered a disproportionate representation in a culture that has traditionally valued boys more highly than girls, and it may be due to the fact that these texts are primarily written by women: of the 55 authors in this sample, 46 are women; they have collectively created 83 of the novels. Liberal feminist value systems shape most of these women writers’ portrayals of girl characters.

Scholars of children’s literature have frequently discussed the connection between women writers and children’s texts (Reynolds 1994). In relation to Indian children’s literature overall, ‘[t]he majority of Indian writers of children’s fiction are women, for reasons that undoubtedly have to do with their putative understanding of the child “sensibility”’ (Sunder Rajan 2003, p.102). In traditional Indian society, grandmothers played the role of oral storyteller; perhaps women writers are taking up this mantle in the contemporary context. The production of children’s literature, even when undertaken by women, does not in and of itself constitute a feminist act; however, the sample novels written by women *do* seem to comprise a feminist literary project, but one that is related to nation-building in complicated ways.

In contemporary Indian children’s literature, feminist ideology is observable in the widespread presence of girl characters and the pursuit of gender equality, with the result that ‘[s]tories where girls are central characters and initiate action are . . . a common feature’ (Banerjee 2008, p.6). In traditional Indian literature, girl characters were either absent or passive (Jain 2002; Jafa 1995), but over the past few decades, Indian women authors have begun to create children’s novels which refute this pattern; in

this sense, most of the novels by women Indian children's authors can be considered a form of feminist children's literature. However, while a work of feminist children's literature can be defined as one in which the protagonist 'triumphs' over 'gender-related conflicts' (Trites, 1997, p.4), a prevalent narrative pattern in many of these novels, it can also be considered a form that is premised on a feminist ideology espousing 'that all people should be treated equally, regardless of gender, race, class, or religion' (Trites 1997, p.2), a definition that renders some of the texts problematic.

Middle-class girls play the central role in these texts. They are empowered and progressive; imagined through the lens of liberal feminism, they act to expand or even reject traditionally prescribed social roles for Indian girls by insisting that girls and boys are equally valued members of society and deserve equal opportunities, particularly in relation to education and self-determination. Rejecting prescriptive traditional constructions of girls as passive, dependent, restricted to the domestic sphere, and less valuable than boys, contemporary Indian women writers both celebrate girls and imagine girlhood as an empowered state by positioning girls as central to the narrative and by positioning girls and women as part of powerful interconnected webs of family and community relationships. These 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. However, new social roles for Indian girls are also prescriptive, simply with different parameters.

The novels' celebrations of girls' capacity to succeed in improving lives and strengthening relationships, both their own and others, involve complex negotiations between gender and tradition and seem to seek to re-write traditional Indian patriarchy, 'the source of the injustice of the cultural expectations, demands, and burdens placed on women according to gender roles' (Kafka 2003, p.187). Women writers imagine 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. This character is shown to have an important role in postcolonial India.

The idea of the postcolonial Indian 'new woman' has been discussed by several scholars, notably by Sunder Rajan in *Real and Imagined Women* (1993). Sunder Rajan recognises a national imperative to develop a contemporary pan-Indian identity and locates it in 'the Indian woman' who is not only 'wife, mother and homemaker' but also 'modern and liberated', because only she can balance '(deep) tradition and (surface) modernity' to '[save] the project of modernisation-without-westernisation' (p.130). Sunder Rajan argues that the 'construction of a "new" "Indian" "woman"' is perpetuated in 'the contemporary discourse of women in India' and questions the use of this figure in nation-building and capitalist agendas (p.130). She finds it problematic that this new Indian woman is consistently portrayed as urban, middle-class, and educated, in that the dissemination of this idealised figure by way of print and television media promotes 'a normative model of citizenship' (p.130). When this powerful image of the new Indian woman is dominant, it not only acts to influence and contain Indian women, it also prevents other versions of Indian womanhood from gaining validation. Sunder Rajan's concerns are also applicable to contemporary children's novels written by Indian women, in that they portray a similarly influential and containing fictional figure that I have identified as the 'new Indian girl.'

Having read across a broad spectrum of these texts, I have identified a tendency for women writers to use girl characters in ways comparable to the new Indian woman theorised by Sunder Rajan. Cumulatively, this body of work is in the process of constructing a model of girlhood that is ideologically significant: my discussion of *Keeping Corner* will demonstrate the ways this model is successful in positioning the new Indian girl as a valuable member of Indian society, while *Suchitra and the Ragpicker* exposes its shortcomings. New Indian girl characters are shaped by liberal feminist

ideals and successfully balance tradition and modernity: they 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. New Indian girls work to overcome restriction in search of empowerment—they *are* the new India. For some readers at least, this model of girlhood is likely to be inspirational.

This should not obscure the fact that, as with the ‘new Indian woman’, it is primarily urban, middle-class girls who are most likely to gain the empowered status of new Indian girls, while girls from rural regions, low caste groups, and/or low socioeconomic status are either absent from these texts or portrayed as deficient and reliant on new Indian girls to rescue them. This positions the textual image of the new Indian girl as a normative model that leaves little space for validation of other versions of girlhood. Clearly this portrayal of the new Indian girl is incomplete, but it can also provide aspirational visions of gender equality, particularly in the pursuit of educational opportunities for girls, an important focus in contemporary India. The overarching goal of the new Indian girl character is to improve society in accordance with liberal values and to create an imagined positive outcome according to a hegemonic value system; in other words, her job is to transform social gender roles so that middle-class girls can contribute to nation-building activities but to leave relatively undisturbed current class and caste hierarchies.

The new Indian girl accomplishes this in many ways, all of which are underpinned by a liberal value system and thus subject to its shortcomings. For example, many middle-class new Indian girls are portrayed as empowered and powerful at the outset of a narrative, thus presenting an idealised portrayal of girlhood according to a liberal feminist outlook. The realities of the vast majority of actual Indian girls, which differ substantially from the textual image of the new Indian girl, are often absent from the texts. When realistic social issues pertinent to many Indian girls, such as child labour and education for impoverished and/or low caste girls, are addressed in children’s novels by Indian women, it is often in a peripheral manner. For example, in Shashi Deshpande’s *A Summer Adventure* (2006), the rescue of Shanta, a servant girl living in slave-like conditions, is the story’s secondary plot and provides its happy ending. The resolution is a common one: she eventually becomes a servant in the protagonists’ family. This shift in Shanta’s status is later portrayed in the sequel, *The Hidden Treasure* (2006), as positive and enlightened according to a liberal value system:

*Later, since Shanta had no parents or family of her own, Amma had taken her into their house. Now she had become their friend, pupil (Minu was teaching her how to read and write), admirer, and Ammu’s devoted helper. (p.103)*

Shanta is an orphan and therefore extremely vulnerable, so the family’s rescue of her could be crucial to her survival. However, regardless of the improvement in her circumstances, her own desires are never made clear, she never vocalises her personal goals, and she remains a servant. She ultimately remains passive and dependent, corroborating Sunder Rajan’s argument that the new Indian woman is urban and middle-class and that other models of womanhood fall short; so it is with new Indian girls.

Western liberal feminism is the ideology at the foundation of these texts. The central goal of liberal feminism is securing gender equality, and activism by liberal feminists often focuses on working to change legislation to gain rights for women, such as educational opportunities, equal pay, and reproductive choice. This philosophy is based on a belief that women experience shared oppression rather than concerned with examining difference, and it rallies around the idea that women’s individual actions and decisions can secure their equal standing within society, even if that society is patriarchal. Deemed progressive and emancipatory by some, liberal feminism has also been criticised. In the past

few decades, many feminists have sought to broaden the parameters of feminism from its liberal roots of identifying shared oppression, achieving equality, and celebrating women's unique contributions to society. From diverse theoretical positions, these feminists have worked broadly to identify ways in which various sociopolitical systems influence and construct gender; they have attempted to create a more nuanced understanding of difference within gender relations and women's experiences. For example, Black feminists such as bell hooks have argued that liberal feminism is preoccupied with the concerns of white, middle-class women and neglects issues of class and race.

Postcolonial feminists have further developed such concerns. For instance, in relation to India, Chandra Talpade Mohanty objects to western feminist constructions of an essentialised 'average Third World Woman' figure who does not reflect nuances of class, caste, region, religion, education level, or sexuality (2003, p.21). This figure is positioned as leading 'an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained)' and being "'Third World' (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.)' (p.21). Mohanty contends that this idea of the Third World Woman is set against 'Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities and the freedom to make their own decisions' (p.21). Such imbalanced gender paradigms are problematic because the conceptual invocation of these binaries leads to essentialisation and precludes Third World Women from acting with agency.

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; Deshpande acknowledges that many Indian women writers, including herself, owe a debt to the women's movement in the west (2003). Thus, I adopt Mohanty's position in relation to girlhood in Indian children's novels, as similarly disturbing portrayals plague a number of texts under consideration here, resulting in a textual pattern whereby middle-class new Indian girls, with their agency contrasting with other girls' passivity, seem superior to Third World girls of low class and caste.

Such stereotyped, disempowered Third World girl characters are set against new Indian girls with education and agency, as *Suchitra and the Ragpicker* demonstrates. In imagining gender equality but perpetuating existing class and caste structures, the portrayal of the new Indian girl is perhaps not as liberatory as it may initially seem. Sunder Rajan draws attention to how class inflects Indian children's literature, noting that as the purchasers of most books, middle-class, English-speaking Indian women through their market power influence children's writers to cater to their 'liberal political preferences' and reflect 'carefully progressive gender and secular positions' (2003, p.102). Similarly, as the readers of these novels will also likely be middle-class girls who in reality may resemble or aspire to become like new Indian girls, Sunder Rajan's insights can be extended and applied to most Indian women writers of children's novels. This class position affects the portrayal of the new Indian girl by creating a narrow version of girlhood. As Viney Kirpal notes in her analysis of *The Girl Child in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Indian Literature* (1992),

*... there is one gaping hiatus in the portraits of this period. They do not depict the victimisation and violence upon the girl child in today's India. There is a telling silence about present day cruelties and oppressive practices that mar the life of the growing Indian girl. Depictions of emancipated girls are restricted to portrayals of girls from the upper/middle classes. (p.x)*

She concludes that '[c]ontemporary literary depictions are progressive in an imitative, western way' (p.xii) and calls for a remedy to this erasure with a wider variety of portrayals of girls. Although she is discussing literature published for an adult audience, I share Kirpal's reservations: for the most part, the

broader portrayals of girls she calls for remain similarly absent in the children's novels of Indian women writers. This problematic omission invests only urban, middle-class girls with the agency to affect positively their families, communities, and individual lives.

In navigating this progressive yet incomplete portrayal of the new Indian girl, it is helpful to consider Susie Tharu and K. Lalita's approach to Indian women's writing, expressed in their Introduction to *Women Writing in India* (1993). They understand this writing 'as documents that display what is at stake in the embattled practices of self and agency . . . at the margins of patriarchies' and which may leave behind some groups' progress at the expense of others' gains (p.39). In this context, the portrayal of the new Indian girl may be seen as a wish-fulfillment fantasy on the part of a small group of women with particular ideological goals. Refuting the traditional, containing boundaries of patriarchy is central among these goals. Many of the contemporary, English-language novels by Indian women authors challenge such boundaries by refusing traditional images of and unequal opportunities for Indian girls.

Kashmira Sheth's *Keeping Corner* provides a particularly clear example of this approach in that it refutes the traditional belief that girls belong contained within the family home by addressing an extreme of this scenario: the case of Brahmin child widows in pre-Independence India. The protagonist Leela is compelled by traditional doctrine to 'keep corner' by remaining inside her home for a year after she is widowed at the age of twelve. Even after the year ends, her subsequent life, as dictated by tradition, will remain a segregated subsistence: she will be a social outcast and considered a burden on her family. But Sheth imagines a positive resolution for Leela, who refuses to be constrained by traditional social restrictions on Hindu widows and protests against this unfair treatment. Instead of remaining housebound and dependent, Leela completes her education, supports herself by becoming a teacher, and influences others to see girls and women as capable of providing valuable contributions to society. She later becomes active in Gandhi's freedom movement. She is the epitome of the new Indian girl, a role only emphasized by this text's setting on the cusp of Independence.

Forced by her relatives to behave according to strict Hindu behavioural codes, newly widowed Leela begins to consider traditional patriarchal Hindu customs and roles for women from a logical and moral perspective informed by liberalism. As a new Indian girl, Leela begins to question tradition and subsequently rejects it after wondering, '[w]ho started this? And why? Can anyone benefit from it?' (p.59). Eventually she decides she must try to resist tradition: 'I realised that this was just a made-up rule, and something inside of me snapped. 'I don't want to follow this custom.'" (p.59). She begins to rebel against the outmoded customs that literally hold her prisoner.

Significantly, Leela does not conceive of herself solely as an individual, but rather sees herself as connected with a societal whole once she begins to understand her position as part of the larger condition of child widows, widows in general, and ultimately women's roles in Indian society. As she becomes familiar with Gandhi's progressive, modern views on women's changing roles in India, Leela begins to recognise as unjust traditional social and religious requirements that illogically dictate women's behaviour; she rails against her family, dissatisfied with their flimsy insistence that this is simply the way things have always been. While Leela initially believes her social position is unnegotiable due to her fate or *kismet* and the ferocious strength of society versus her own apparent impotence, she later comes to understand that her actions can make a difference in changing her life. In reading the newspaper daily, as well as undertaking other reading for her schoolwork, she becomes familiar with the philosophical values and protest work of activists, including Gandhi, who are leading the struggle to emancipate women in India—as well as India itself. In turn, Leela then recognises that her individual actions can affect her entire society. With the help of others such as her teacher and her

brother, Leela not only acts with agency to fulfill her goals, she also realizes that she can contribute to modernizing Indian society.

In *Keeping Corner*, the conflation of national progress and gender equality is clearly demonstrated as Gandhi's pursuit of freedom from colonial control is consistently shown to inspire Leela's own pursuit of freedom from patriarchal constraints. She frequently uses his principles and arguments to support her own: for example, she confronts her father by saying, 'Gandhiji thinks widows should be able to go to school . . . . What good are all [his] ideas if widows and their families don't take the lead? Ba, I want to study, and I need your help' (p.236). Eventually, her father recognizes that 'this is not just about Leela, it is also about something bigger' (p.246-7) and assents. The new Indian girl as a collective *is* about something bigger: changing social roles for Indian females, roles that ultimately serve a national agenda. Thus, in their own small ways, Leela and other fictional new Indian girl characters create a ripple effect that conceptually expands the boundaries not only of girlhood but also of what comprises the Indian nation. Contemporary women authors such as Sheth re-write traditional Indian stories to foreground girls' and women's education, paid work outside the home, and social contributions to community—all important activities in postcolonial India.

With the help of her teacher and several of her relatives, Leela, like many girl protagonists in other novels by Indian women writers, tackles her own tradition-bound gender inequality head-on as the central narrative conflict: she *becomes* a new Indian girl. This becoming can take a multitude of forms, but it is always middle- or upper-class girls, like Leela, who seek to become new Indian girls. They may strive to secure educational opportunities or insist on participating in activities that have been traditionally designated male. Whatever the challenge, new Indian girls always succeed in overcoming it, as demonstrated in the example of *Keeping Corner*. Leela is portrayed as becoming inspired by Gandhi and later goes on to participate in the freedom movement in India. She clearly represents a new way of being for Indian girls, but her opportunity is enabled by her class status; for example, her brother is willing and able to pay for the higher education that qualifies her to become a teacher, allowing her to succeed. What of girls who lack such social and economic support?

It is disturbing that none of the novels in this sample are focalised from the point of view of a low-caste girl, or one from outside of the urban middle or upper classes. The few token girls portrayed as secondary characters from low caste or class groups rely on middle-class new Indian girls to rescue them from inequality, and during this process they are rarely consulted about their own goals, nor do they take initiative or make decisions for themselves. The result of such interactions is that low caste girls such as KUPI in Radha Padmnabhan's *Suchitra and the Ragpicker* come to represent an imagined 'Third World girl,' one who is passive, dependent, and inferior (as well as generally underdeveloped as a fictional character). This Third World girl is a blight on Indian society, reflecting poorly on its progress, and she must be transformed into the kind of new Indian girl who successfully combines tradition and modernity. In contemporary, English-language Indian children's novels by contemporary women writers, the rescuers, new Indian girls, are portrayed as heroic saviors, inviting admiration: it is clear that ideologically, their behaviour is correct. The new Indian girl's motivation to help other girls access education and achieve gender equality is to be celebrated. Characters such as Suchitra in *Suchitra and the Ragpicker* fulfill the heroic role of new Indian girl by acting to improve their communities through empowering other girls to become new Indian girls and by converting or overcoming those who oppose such progress. They not only participate in the project of transforming restriction to empowerment, they actually initiate it.

In *Suchitra and the Ragpicker* the rescue motif comprises the central narrative. It is telling that Suchitra, a middle-class girl and the protagonist, is named in the title while the girl she purports to

'save' is known only by her social position. Suchitra becomes inspired to rescue 'a dirty ragpicker' from her present-day suburb of New Delhi when she glances out her window to see the girl sifting through the garbage 'with poetry in her movement and a spring in her step' (p.9). KUPI, the ragpicker girl, is described with the baffling combination of being 'so ragged and so dirty' and yet 'so cheerful' (p.11). Suchitra demands of her mother 'one good reason why she should not go to school like me' and becomes compelled to help the girl even though 'she hadn't the faintest idea what she was going to do' (p.13).

Suchitra begins to gain an understanding of the complexity of KUPI's situation when her teacher explains that '[i]n a country like ours, many parents are so poor that they send their children to work' (p.18). She welcomes her teacher's suggestion to find a way to send KUPI to school. However, this solution is demonstrated to be overly simplistic when Suchitra learns that KUPI is both an orphan and a virtual slave to a local man who forces her to collect garbage and keeps the money she earns. It seems impossible for KUPI to become educated and begin the journey towards becoming a new Indian girl—clearly an intolerable situation.

As she strives to enact change, Suchitra encounters significant resistance to her new Indian girl value system. Her friends initially wonder at her beliefs: 'You sure have funny ideas, Suchi. I have often seen children rummage in these bins, too, but never really paid them any attention' (p.11), and her mother warns her not to 'get agitated' or to 'think of' KUPI (p.13). Later, though, her parents accept Suchitra's determination to help KUPI, and they begrudgingly support her: her mother both 'admire[s] Suchitra' and 'wonder[s] why Suchitra couldn't behave like an ordinary little girl' (p.31). Clearly, the new Indian girl in her transformative mode is a novelty, but also ultimately admirable: when Suchitra's father later reluctantly admits that he is 'proud of her,' her mother concurs (p.33). Her final point of resistance comes in the form of the man who controls KUPI, whom she later learns kidnapped KUPI (and other children) in infancy. While she is unable to convert his belief system, Suchitra manages to overcome him, too, by enlisting the help of her friends and the police.

Once KUPI and the other children are safe—saved—Suchitra's parents and teacher decide she 'deserves a reward' for helping KUPI, and Suchitra uses the opportunity to attempt to do something of the utmost importance to most new Indian girls: deepen her interrelationships. Suchitra wishes her family would 'adopt KUPI and give me a sister' (p.61). Instead, her teacher adopts the girl. This adult authority figure will attempt to find KUPI's parents, but if she cannot, she intends to raise KUPI and take responsibility for her education. Thus, the outcome Suchitra had initially hoped for, that KUPI would be able to attend school, is circuitously achieved by the novel's resolution, and as a bonus a beggar master has been brought down, numerous children have been freed from his bondage, and they have the chance to be reunited with their families. Suchitra's concern for another little girl's welfare has a very high payoff—her community is immeasurably improved. The Indian nation is a better place in that it more closely resembles the liberal, modern goals of the Indian constitution. Acting as a true new Indian girl, Suchitra has transformed restriction to empowerment, and her actions have positively affected a multitude of people. She has succeeded in modernizing her tiny corner of postcolonial India.

Despite its uplifting message, there are problematic stereotypes at play in *Suchitra and the Ragpicker*. Not only is KUPI a consistently passive, dependent girl, but also the class and caste rift between Suchitra and KUPI is broad, and it is clearly implied that Suchitra's subject position as a new Indian girl is valuable and right, while KUPI's, as a Third World girl, is marred. While as a new Indian girl Suchitra attempts to treat KUPI as an equal, it is always clear that they are *not* equal: KUPI is low-caste, and thus she is inferior. Equally disturbing is the fact that KUPI's physical attractiveness is the quality that initially compels Suchitra's attention. It is difficult to understand why Suchitra would be more



inspired by a cheerful ragpicker child than a miserable, downtrodden one. It is also unlikely that a malnourished, abused child such as KUPI would move gracefully rather than with exhaustion. Indeed, in *The Summer Adventure* the children feel ‘very sorry’ for Shanta because she has ‘a very dirty little face’, ‘torn clothes’, and ‘timid’ eyes, which make her appear ‘a real scarecrow’ (Deshpande 2006, p.27). In contrast, the poetry in KUPI’s movements and her large-eyed face make her an exotic, stereotyped figure, and it is troubling that only her physical attractiveness marks her as valuable enough to help. It is impossible to argue with the idea that all girls deserve to be educated; however, when middle-class girls are consistently portrayed as heroic saviors of low-caste girls, a skewed balance of power can result. Writing that features the new Indian girl can unwittingly perpetuate a larger hegemonic structure.

While narratives such as *Keeping Corner*, which imagine girls taking initiative and acting with agency to become new Indian girls by obtaining education and pursuing gender equality can provide inspiration and demonstrate that gender equality may be attainable, the relentless positioning of the new Indian girl as middle-class can also be seen as oppressive. The frequent omission or distortion of class and caste struggles in the quest to become a new Indian girl is a disturbing trend, as demonstrated by *Suchitra and the Ragpicker*. It is also problematic that even when Indian women writers attempt to include low-caste girls or those from outside the middle class, they often do so in a token manner that perpetuates stereotypes and ultimately maintains a hegemonic order in which the powerful middle and upper Indian classes define the parameters of existence for others. In this context, it is imperative that all girls become new Indian girls; however, Third World girls are unable to initiate this transformation and must instead wait to be rescued from their unenlightened states by middle-class new Indian girls.

As imagined by Indian women writers in many English-language children’s novels, the new Indian girl is a savior: in emancipating herself and others and pursuing gender equality, she transforms herself and her community, ultimately providing a valuable contribution to postcolonial India by creating an empowered balance between tradition and modernity. She symbolises a new way of being not only for Indian girls, but also for the Indian nation. However, this aspirational vision is not without its flaws, as evidenced by the fact that in fiction she is called into the service of hegemonic social structures. Novels featuring the new Indian girl tend to oversimplify class and caste issues, and she is associated with a prescriptive ideology; often these characteristics negate the very equality that the ideals of the new Indian girl seem to seek. As a result, the new Indian girl can also be a bully. As in the nation itself, in English-language Indian children’s novels gender equality has not yet come to full fruition.

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup>Mohini Rao has identified the presence of new Indian women characters in Indian children’s literature (1995).

<sup>ii</sup>Male writers do not tend to employ the figure of the new Indian girl in their work. Notable exceptions include *Rani and Sukh* (2004) by Bali Rai and Ranjit Lal’s feminist novel *The Battle for No. 19* (2007).

<sup>iii</sup> See hooks’s *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984).

<sup>iv</sup> As they are virtually the only members of society with financial, linguistic, and geographic access to the texts.

<sup>v</sup>The highest caste in the traditional Hindu caste system. Leela’s family is middle-class.

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