

Gender Discrimination in Children's Folktales: A Special Study of Ashraf Sabohi's Stories

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***Abstract:** Children's folktales are one of the most popular genres of the Urdu literature. There are large numbers of magazines and periodicals on children's literature in Urdu. A large number of Urdu books are also published in children's literature. Many writers became popular for their stories and folktales in children's literature. Ashraf Sabohi is one of those who wrote stories for children and became popular. Folktales and stories are also considered a big part of early childhood education which develops the children's behavior, thinking, and creativeness. So children's literature must be unbiased and without gender discrimination. When we critically analyzed Ashraf Sabohi's folktales and stories written for children, there were serious issues regarding bias and gender discrimination. The serious question is whether either these folktales or short stories written by Ashraf Sabohi are suitable for early childhood education. This article is about gender discrimination in children's folktales about the special study of Ashraf Sabohi's stories a well-known writer of Urdu literature.*

***Keywords:** Children's folktales, Children's stories, Gender Discrimination, Ashraf Sabohi*

Introduction

The process of listening to stories plays an important role in the linguistic, emotional, and psychological development of children. This process becomes a source of entertainment for the audience on the one hand, and on the other hand, children also gain awareness of social principles, values, and attitudes. As a child's mind develops and evolves, children's literature, especially stories, plays an important role in their mental formation and they try to know and recognize the universe through this knowledge. In children's literature, the genre of the story has been described as fiction, fantasy, poetry, fairy tales, folk tales, and non-fictional prose. Folktales are of special importance in this regard because folktales describe the basic elements of any culture as well as refer to national identity.

Children's folktales play a very important role in the development of their social life and personality. The general attitude towards these stories is that they should have an unbiased thought. They are expected to avoid ideological differences and skeptical attitudes. However, in practice, this attitude is rarely seen in children's Urdu literature. Studies of children's Urdu folktales show that through these stories, children are precociously exposed to negative attitudes such as nationalism, subversive activities, and artificial standards of beauty. In addition, through these stories, they are aware that human society consists of class, race, and gender differences. Therefore, men and women are treated differently in this society. Inevitably, in such a society, different kinds of expectations are set from men and women, so they are also able to understand what is their place and status in society as a boy or a girl. This gender discrimination can be well understood by Sandra Bem's Gender Schema Theory. "Gender schemas are thought to develop in a two-step process. First, children develop in-group/out-group schemas, in which they learn how their society dichotomizes information according to gender. Once they have acquired gender identity, they are able to determine which information applies to their own group (i.e., their own gender) and then proceed to pay more attention to that information. Second, children acquire an own-sex schema as they continue to develop knowledge about their own gender and use that knowledge to guide their behavior and their thinking".(I)

The tradition of children's literature in the Urdu language has been very stable since the beginning. The poems written for children by Muhammad Hussain Azad and Ismail Mirthi in the nineteenth century are of special importance. The evolution continued and in the twentieth century, regular magazines for children were published. Among the early writers of the twentieth century, Ismail Mirthi, Mirza Adeeb, Khawaja Hassan Nizami, and Rashid Ahmed Siddiqui are prominent names in children's literature.

Among the writers who wrote prose stories for the children, the name of Ashraf Sabohi comes up as an important reference. Most of his stories are folktales and fairy tales. Ashraf Sabohi has written stories by himself as well as translated many stories written for children in English. These are written for nine to tenth-year old children because these stories have their own style and rhythm which is very difficult for children to understand. Muhammad Saeed writes in this regard:

"Ashraf Sabohi's stories and articles are often published in magazines. Another prominent feature of his writing is the use of idioms and the everyday use language of Delhi, which can be considered as proof of his language skills. Few writers use it." (I)

The style of his stories is common and simple. As far as there is a reference to the statements of gender discrimination in his stories, this gender discrimination seems to exist unconsciously. In this research paper, Ashraf Sabohi's folk stories written for children will be studied in the context of gender division in society and it will be seen at what level the social differences presented in these stories affect children. Also, how do these gender differences determine their place and role in the surrounding environment

and life? This paper will be limited to the folktales and fairy tales written by Ashraf Sabohi for children. Analytical and descriptive methods of research will be adopted for this purpose.

Methodology:

Sandra Bem's Gender Schema Theory (Bem, 1981) has been chosen for this research. It holds that children acquire the consciousness of gender discrimination from the very early age, which becomes more prominent as they grow older. In younger children, ideal career preferences also develop according to gender discrimination, for example, boys are more likely to like careers related to bravery and strength like being an athlete or a soldier and girls choose a career that preserves their dignity like teaching or becoming a veterinarian. In this research contextual design has been used to analyze the representation of male and female characters in the short stories of Ashraf Sabohi.

Discussion:

From a general point of view, it is not only difficult but impossible to eliminate this concept of gender discrimination from the society of the subcontinent because the social structure itself has given it the status of acceptance. The first motivation is the concept of housework associated with the woman, from which she does not get any economic benefit. Her domestic responsibilities are considered her birth duty, so they are not taken into consideration. The second concept is that women have no need to work and earn money, so they are always dependent on men. This concept of economic dependence makes women weak; as a result, society considers them subordinate to men in every respect.

In the stories written by Ashraf Sabohi for children, gender bias is visible. In which the role of women is limited only to housework; even in ruling they are bound and subordinated to the thinking of men. While the men, on the other hand, are seen as active in all social institutions. Women are depicted as characters who should be skilled in housework, have cooking skills, and have the courtesy to take care of the household members. One should be submissive to their father, brother, and husband and should be subservient to their thinking. In the story "Nani Basti", Nani is also presented as a character who is a very strong and polite woman in domestic affairs. Therefore, her personality is explained by words like, "brighter look", "innocent things" and "manners".

"God bless Nani Basti, where are the wives who defeated the women of such heaven now? What a bright look and what kind of innocent things. If the skill is in someone like her, take it. She has such skill in cooking that the cooks and waiters can't make it. The thing is that the destiny of a woman is in manners."

(2)

The role of the grandmother is completely subservient to male dominance. Therefore, when she plans to go to another city to meet her sister, she gives priority to her grandson's will and says, "Well, you have the authority to take me away in whatever you want. Now what can I say to you." (3) Here the word

“authority” explains the whole thing that she has entrusted all her affairs to the grandson. So the role of the grandson in the story is not just a story character, but it becomes a representative role of the male society in which the woman is taught from childhood to surrender all her powers to the man.

Ashraf Sabohi’s study of folk tales written for children shows that in these stories men and women are presented in the form of traditional gender roles. For example, women are presented as less intelligent and less understanding characters, while in comparison, male characters are presented as a leader, protectors, and brave people. This also makes it clear that a woman does not have her status, but the standard of her identity and recognition is the male characters to which she is attributed. That’s why most of these stories portray women as housewives who are intellectually and practically subservient to men’s thinking.

“The king said to his daughter, “Take the proud girl, now get ready. Now you are a foreigner. It is not your business to stay here. Be with your husband wherever he takes you.” (4)

This concept of gender discrimination in society not only limits the thinking of children but also robs them of their individuality. Therefore, instead of expressing themselves correctly according to their personality, they are obliged to express themselves according to their gender. Since this division based on gender is created by our social system, it is instilled in the minds of children from childhood to express their feelings according to their gender. In the stories of Ashraf Sabohi, the female characters are mostly seen as scared, timid, and waiting for the help of the male characters, while the male character shows the element of self-confidence and bravery.

“The princess was so frightened by this question that she started sweating.” (5)

“The prince saluted and went out on his horse.”(6)

“After all, Shataba was the girl. She started laughing.”(7)

“After all, the sons of Nani Basti are also sons of Nani Basti. Well, being a man is another matter.” (8)

Although in many of his stories, the woman is the central character of the story, this woman’s role is not central because of her intelligence or insight, but because of her beauty and gentleness. The female characters are mostly static characters that do not show any evolution. The characteristics of such characters remain the same from the beginning to the end and do not change.

“The girl was a model of God’s power. She was so beautiful that she was one in thousands. As she grew older, her beauty grew. The daughters of the rich would wish to meet him.” (9)

Most of the female characters in these folktales are shown as passive. Wherever princesses are mentioned, their characters are shown lying down, sitting, or waiting for a prince to come and free them from imprisonment. If the characters of ordinary girls are shown, they are shown doing housework. No specific occupation or educational qualifications are specified for these characters. On the other hand, when the male characters are portrayed as princes, they look active. These characters seem to be engaged in adventures or motivated for a specific purpose.

Even the characters of ordinary men do not seem to be passive but busy with some new campaign somewhere. There is no male character who is seen waiting for another character or helpless in a particular situation. The reason for such a difference in the presentation of male and female characters is not their physical structure at all. Rather, it is the socially and culturally determined boundaries that force these roles into functionality and non-functionality.

Social rules do not allow women to decide on their own free will. The reason for this is not that society does not have confidence in a woman's intelligence and her power of decision, but it does not want to give this right to a woman. In the story of "Princess Badar", the character of the princess is seen as a victim of the same male oppression. In her childhood, she thinks about the possibilities that are not available to her. However, as she grows up, she realizes that she does not have the power to make decisions about her life. So, to express her one wish, all the samosa sellers are banished from the city.

"One day she said in her heart when I grow up, I will get married to a samosa seller. The king had a big idea. He expelled all the samosa sellers from his city." (10)

While reading these stories, the most dominant feature of the women is their physical attractiveness. Apart from this, they are not represented in other areas of life. In the story "Jewel Princess", the beauty of the princess is described by similes like "sunlit", "moonlit", "eyes like deer" and "cheeks like a rose". Inevitably, this appearance of the princess is more about her fragility. In the next line of the story, she is shown crying alone in the desert. She is imprisoned by a male merchant and then seeks help from a male of the same society. One man is cruel and the other can resist this oppression. These are the narratives of this society that show that women cannot resist the oppression of men.

"One night, he saw in a dream a beautiful woman with a sunlit, moonlit nose, eyes like a deer, cheeks like a rose, standing alone in the desert crying. Seeing the prince, she said, "For God's sake, save me. Otherwise, the bandits will kill me. I am in the possession of the red merchant of Baghdad. He is very greedy and cruel." (11)

The lack of central status of women in society is an important topic of feminist thought. In which the objective attitudes towards women in the society are discussed. The thinkers in favor of this thought believe that society sees women as "the other", that is, women are considered as an object instead of being considered as complete persons. In the stories of Ashraf Sabohi, the same behavior is explained regarding the treatment of the women. In these stories, women are bought in exchange for diamonds and jewels, and in some cases, they are traded for an empire. The concern behind these objective attitudes is that women are bought and also objects to be used. In the story "Gohar Princess", the girl is also treated as a commodity to be bought and sold.

"The prince recognized at first sight and asked what it was worth. The merchant said: Its value is the weight of jewels. Place it in one part of the scales and put gold, pearls, and diamonds in the other, and

then the deal will be done. He weighed as much gold as the girl. He put the girl on a horse and came to the inn.” (12)

While reading these stories, one realizes that the role of women in society is limited to a few specific fields and even in those fields the supremacy of men is established. The author has presented the very beloved character “Niyazi Begum” in the form of a traditional woman’s character. The characteristic of this character is that this daughter, sister, and wife know the art of persuading herself on all levels, but her options are very limited. Since these limits are determined by the male society, she does not have the right to read and write despite her intelligence.

“For writing, the pen was touched by a girl and bitten by a snake. The old people would give a little permission to read, but they were staunch enemies of learning to write. They thought that if she learned writing the girls would be lost...Even if Niyazi Begum took over the board, her father scolded her and her mother asked her who should write the letter. It will tarnish our reputation.” (13)

This type of extremist behavior is fostered by society’s stereotyping and irrational intellectual tendencies. The presentation of such ideas in children’s literature leads to developing their thinking in the wrong direction. They are forced to think that the meaning of education is not the same for both men and women. The same education that leads to constructive thinking and better training for men is being denied to women.

These female characters do not have any special thoughts or visions, but their thinking is subordinated to the thinking of the male characters. For example, in the story, “Star Chin Moon Forehead”, the characters of the minister’s daughter and the merchant’s daughter are shown as having some special qualities. However, these characters see these attributes as beneficial to men instead of being beneficial to them.

“Minister’s daughter Said, “Aunt! I have the shadow of the saint. No clothes are dirty or old on my body. Whoever I marry will be prosperous. The daughter of the merchant said, “There is no rejection or self-deception for me. I also have a pray of the saint, whatever pearl I touch, if it is black, it will turn white. Even the one who marries me cannot remain poor.” (14)

If the male characters are analyzed, a certain type of sovereignty and domination can be seen in them. Therefore, the physical movements of these characters and their actions also show violent behavior. For example, in the story “Magic Mirror” words are used like “large army”, “assault”, “taken”, “vandalized” and “threw away” to describe the prince’s adventures. These words are used to show his attitude, fear, and arrogance.

“The prince prepared a large army and attacked the queen’s country, snatched the mirror and smashed it.” (15)

Conclusion:

If we examine the titles of the stories written by Ashraf Sabohi for children, most of them are based on the concept of the beauty of delicate gender. This concept shows the representation of women in the stories but only to the extent that these characters are naturally the embodiment of beauty. Due to their beauty, people love them a lot and are devoted to them. For example, the titles of his stories include “Moon Princess”, “Jewel Princess” and “Proud Princess”. However, in practice, these characters look very helpless and forced. They have no authority over their own life and will. On the other hand, the titles of the stories based on the names of male characters reflect the personal and character traits of these characters i.e., “Naughty Lion” and “Jeweler of Baghdad” etc. Such titles show an element of dynamism and activity in these characters.

Overall, the attitude of gender bias is dominant in the folk stories written by Ashraf Sabohi for children. Men are strong and authoritative in their own right, so they make their decisions according to their will, while women’s characters are submissive and subject to men’s thinking. The good women characters in these stories are beautiful and physically attractive women, for which they do not need intelligence or understanding at all. Her responsibilities revolve around taking care of household affairs, being an expert in cooking, and taking care of her husband and children. Economically, these roles or women are not powerful because they are dependent on men’s roles. In contrast, the male characters of Ashraf Sabohi’s stories are seen as adventurers, and deal makers and have active social responsibilities.

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