

# COUNTERING PREJUDICE, CREATING RESILIENCE: CONCERNS IN DEVELOPING GENDER SENSITIVE ENGLISH CURRICULUM

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**Meenakshi Malhotra**

*Associate Professor*

*Department of English*

*University of Delhi*

*Email: meenakshi@hrc.du.ac.in*

## **Abstract**

The pandemic has acted as a critical event which has necessitated digital education on a hitherto unprecedented scale. At the same time, it has triggered and exacerbated anxiety and other mental health issues in an alarming manner and stretched people's -both children and adults'-coping mechanisms to the limit. In this context, language education is not just about learning to use a language to listen, speak, read and write the language but also about imparting life skills. The National Education Policy (NEP) advocates the curricular inclusion of inculcating psycho-social skills and aims to encourage holistic growth. In this context, the texts chosen are of utmost importance: at multiple academic levels-primary and middle school, high school, and college, in tertiary education sectors, as well as the ways in which we use the text to raise important and pertinent questions in the classroom. This article cites selective school textbooks for English to indicate the kind of study material, which is value based and gender sensitive, without being overly moralistic or preachy. At the same time, it will also attempt to suggest ways of creating workbooks/sheets which enable and encourage an active engagement with the text, while being alert to the risk of biases which tend to creep in. This essay is based on classroom exercises of English language and literature learning and pedagogy. It is partly founded on empirical research based on school workshops that I conducted and participated in.

**Keywords:** Literature Curriculum, Ethical Concerns, Pedagogy, Gender, Dialogue.

## **Introduction and Context**

Without reiterating a cliched humanistic notion about the hallowed function of literature and what the literary can achieve, or how it could substitute for religion, the paper argues that literature imbues

us with greater empathy and at the same time, can give us emotional resilience. As an academic who is most comfortable working at the intersection of literature and gender, English teaching brings with it the responsibility to promote not only language competence but also something that brings with it a basket of concerns which could perhaps be classified as ethical, affective and political.

In English teaching, whether at the school and college level, we find that texts we choose for our curricula are extremely important as well as the way we teach it. In the context of higher education there might ensue a battle of the books of the kind that was witnessed in the Learning Outcome Curriculum Framework (LOCF) syllabus introduced in Delhi University in 2021, apropos the English syllabus. The significance of choosing particular texts and determining the way they are transacted becomes even more important in the context of school textbooks, given the fact that some of the centralized boards cater to a wide cross-section of heterogeneous students across the social spectrum. This heterogeneity may also translate into lack of access to digital education for students who can hardly acquire a smartphone, much less a computer. The five observations in this paper are mostly based on an experience when I was briefly involved in a consultatory capacity with a well-known publisher involved in writing/editing English textbooks for Grades 1-8 for the ICSE about four years ago. I was asked to investigate aspects of content, choice of texts as well the exercises framed around the text to mobilize and energize language learning. Gender, social differences, political correctness, both the metatext and subtext in a sense, came under our purview.

To energize and ensure language learning, the publishers also designed accompanying workbooks with writing exercises that could guide teachers as well as ensure engaged pedagogy and a system of learning by doing. I will here draw on a particular story that was taught and transacted at the middle-school level and in a sense, present a case history of what we-as teachers could suggest leading to an active and sustained engagement with the text. However, before I foreground the text and exercises to stimulate language learning, there are a few issues that one needs to keep in mind, perhaps a statutory warning that “our school textbooks cannot pretend” that they exist in isolation from social inequalities and that these inequalities do not “permeate them” (Nawani, *Indian Express*, Dec 1, 2021)

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## Concerns

In an earlier article, Disha Nawani, a Professor of Education at TISS, had expressed skepticism about the “joy of learning” saying that the joy of learning lies not in creating song and dance but about “creating a positive ecosystem that facilitates participatory education and teaches how to derive pleasure from the process of learning” (Nawani, *Indian Express*, Sept. 16 2021) In many instances these days we see a certain level of hate culture being peddled in social media through vicious trolling.

Underlying such actions/events are “deep rooted prejudices, stereotypes, expressions of self-righteousness, mistrust and hatred for those who are different from us-in terms of religion, gender, caste and class” (ibid). The author goes on to argue that schools do not exist in isolation but are a microcosm of the society around us. Thus, if there are rifts and “cleavages” in society, they will get reflected in schools. As an example, Nawani suggests that the experiences of a Dalit girl or a Brahmin boy would be different, even if the school happened to be the same. This is to emphasize that the subjective matrix of the experience cannot be dismissed. It is inevitable that the social reality outside of school would also impinge upon and impact, at an overt or covert level, what the learner experiences in school. An apparently innocuous issue like dropping last (often caste) names has different implications for an upper caste/class person and a lower caste/class person. Similarly, the upper caste person has the liberty to overlook caste difference though the obverse does not hold true.

In other contexts, too, it could be advocated that school education should be responsive to specific experiences. To suggest an example, many schoolchildren have lost at least one parent during the pandemic. Thus, at the most basic level, the textbook could tweak the idea of the normative family and give instances of caregiving by other family members or friends. Instead, there is often a tendency to impose a “one size fits all” picture of a prescriptive family, which may be different from a description of more flexible notions of family. The other issue is also the way many traditional textbooks visualize women (mother as a lady in a sari with hair in a bun) and gendered labour (Bhog 2002, 2011). Here, one can cite the importance of nursery rhymes and the stories they tell and the subliminal messages they carry.

Nawani in this context foregrounds other issues. In imposing a homogeneous set of expectations on the students, the school takes no note of stratification or diversity. The child's experiences are not allowed into the schoolroom. Moreover, representations of other cultures are done in a skewed way, their specificities either ignored or misrepresented. The school textbook consciously or otherwise, replicates patterns of discrimination which prevail outside. Lower castes or Dalits, disablism or trans-identities, minority cultures and practices tend to be represented in a poor light or in a tokenistic way.

In seeking to educate school pupils in the Humanities, we often become more dehumanized. This happens when we endorse the sacrifice of an "Eklavya" who gave his thumb to Dronacharya as "gurudakshina," rather than calling it out as an act of gross injustice and condemning it. Instead of interrogating Brahminical hegemony, we are upholding it. Similarly, every time we extol and glorify Sita's or any instance of maternal sacrifice, we are condoning gender injustice. The worldview that gets shaped explicitly holding up "one nation, one world." But the collectivity, the "we" it manufactures and creates, is a deeply fractured one. In all this, a child who experiences discrimination on a daily basis-the dalit, Muslim or tribal -runs the risk of having their everyday experiences negated and invalidated. As Nawani puts it, "prejudice becomes our lens, shaping the way we look at the world and others around us" (*Indian Express*, Dec1, 2021).

### **The New Education Policy**

The National Education Policy (hereafter NEP) document in its vision statement aims to identify and "foster the unique capabilities of each student, by sensitizing teachers as well as parents to promote students' holistic development in both academic and non-academic spheres. It also aims to promote flexibility so that learners could choose their own learning trajectories according to their talents and interests" without differentiating or drawing sharp lines between curricular and extra-curricular and creating silos between different areas of learning-the sciences, social sciences arts, humanities, and sports for a multidisciplinary and holistic education. It proposes to focus on promoting conceptual understanding rather than focusing on rote knowledge, innovation rather than regurgitative learning. Its stated intention is to encourage and foster/promote ethics, human and constitutional values like empathy, respect for others, cleanliness, courtesy, democratic spirit and a spirit

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of service, respect for public property, scientific temper, liberty, responsibility, pluralism, equality, and justice. It also aims to promote multilingualism with a view to communicate the power of language in teaching and learning processes.

Significantly, the NEP document also stresses on the importance of imbibing life skills such as communication, cooperation, teamwork, and resilience. Significantly, it articulates a resolve to respect diversity and the local context in all curricula, pedagogy, and policy.” Beyond diversity, it also pledges to respect values of equity, inclusion as the cornerstone of all educational decisions to ensure that all students thrive in the educational system. Moreover, the NEP document flags its concern with creating synergy in curriculum across all levels of education from early childhood care to school to higher educational institutions. Among other components it intends to encourage the pursuit, not of rote learning, but innovation and creativity in the teaching-learning project. It is on these ideas about innovation and out of the -box pedagogic methods that I now turn to.

Thinking about education has also been necessitated by the pandemic which has introduced and in fact, made digital education a possible and innovative way forward. And yet digital education is a challenge not easy to overcome, given our demographics, differential access to technology, smartphones and computers. These issues plague students and pose serious impediments and challenges to the teaching-learning process. Further, excessive screen time and work from home creates its own stresses that both teachers and students have to contend with. How can we promote language learning along with the values envisioned by the NEP document?

### **Designing Textbooks /Workbooks towards engaged pedagogy**

In order to address some of these concerns that I have flagged in the previous section, I draw upon Mahashweta Devi’s short story, ‘The Why-Why Girl’.

In this story the protagonist, Moyna who is a “shobor”, a girl from a tribal community lives in a village. She displays boundless curiosity about anything and everything and displays a questioning spirit. In the village Samiti (a collective where the author also worked) school and in the context of her home and community, she stands out for the

probing nature of the questions asked by her. Some of these are both fundamental and foundational, not only her curiosity about natural processes but also social structure and relationships. In the first instance, Moyna asks why she cannot eat all kinds of snakes. The author tells her that not all snakes are edible. I would analyze this as a clever narrative manoeuvre, since this account makes space for naturalizing and even domesticating difference, without any comment about the social groups that hunt, forage and cook different kinds of food and meat. Though her poverty is not highlighted, it comes up in the context of her other questions when she asks why she cannot eat rice twice a day and why she cannot go to school in the morning but has to work for the village “zamindar” or landlord. Instead of accepting hierarchies and embodying an attitude of resignation, Moyna persists in asking some probing and sometimes uncomfortable questions.

Thus, she asks why the landlord/zamindar’s sons cannot do the work of herding animals, but have to have her, Moyna, or her brother do the work. The point about Moyna’s active mind, her refusal of any stance of passive acceptance of or passive acquiescence in the status quo is clearly illustrated by the author, Mahashweta Devi.

The task for the teacher is to enhance understanding, help to develop language competence and promote certain positive values like integrity and moral courage. Following the NEP vision document, parts of which have been quoted above, pedagogy would involve imparting and imbibing both certain life skills as well as criticality. What are the tasks that could be set in order to promote “conceptual understanding rather than focusing on rote knowledge, innovation rather than regurgitative learning”. How can the story be deployed “to encourage and foster/promote ethics, human and constitutional values like empathy, respect for others, cleanliness, courtesy, democratic spirit and a spirit of service, respect for public property, scientific temper, liberty, responsibility, pluralism, equality and justice”, communicate life skills, cooperation and innovation?

Invoking Paulo Freire’s (1968) idea of the pedagogy of the oppressed, a foundational text of critical pedagogy, I would argue that Moyna takes the first steps in questioning and critically reflecting on her situation and oppression. As an educator, one way of going forward with this story



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may be to suggest and devise ways where students could be engaged in a participatory activity to energize the curriculum, as it were.

This could be done through creating a dialogic format and dramatizing the text. English language teaching practitioners have pointed out the significance of dialogue as a valid pedagogical method (Thornbury and Slade, 2006) I present my own attempt at reworking this story in a dialogic format.

### ‘The Why Why Girl’: Dialogue Format

Moyna: Do you know why the sky is blue? Why do girls have to do all the household work? And graze cattle? And work on the landlord’s farm?

Teacher: You have so many questions. And as for why girls have to do all the household work, earn a livelihood and supplement the family income is something we have to think about. It may be because of a system called patriarchy where men have effectively controlled the action and movements of women.

Moyna: But Ma’am there is a difference between men as well. The landlord and his sons are different from my father and brother. Why is that so?

Jharna (Moyna’s friend): You can’t stop asking questions. And that way the class will go on and on. It will never get over. There will be more things for us to learn. Can’t you keep your questions to yourself?

Teacher (who has overheard part of this conversation): On the contrary, it is a good thing that Moyna asks questions. You can say that it’s the most important part of the learning process.

Moyna: But that does not answer my question, teacher. Why do I have to get the cattle home for the landlord? Why can’t his sons work?

Teacher: The landlord and his sons have to manage the estate and do accounts. Moreover, as long as they have cheap and unpaid labour to do the work for them, they will avoid working.

Moyna (interrupting as if she has stumbled upon a new understanding): The labour will not be available once there are other ways for us to make a living and earn.... We will not be dependent on the scraps they throw our way... (turning to her friend Jharna and seeking approval from the teacher) That is why we need to learn, earn and make our way in the world.

Teacher: And perhaps help to change the world you live in. And you can start doing that by asking meaningful questions. Asking questions is a sign of an active mind which seeks solutions and answers, is ready to receive ideas and thoughts and absorb them more quickly than others.

Moyna (feeling somewhat triumphant): So there, I don't know why you people complain so much.(to her classmates). So, Ma'am, it is not a bad thing to ask questions, is it? My mother also complains that I ask too many questions.

Teacher: As I said, raising questions is one way to gain knowledge. The method of learning through asking questions is also called the "dialogic" method or the Socratic method. There was a philosopher in Ancient Greece called Socrates who used this method or mode of inquiry to discuss a lot of natural and social issues.

Moyna: Who is a philosopher? What does he do?

Teacher: A philosopher is a person who is trained to make us think about the meaning and purpose of life, how we should think, why it is important to be good, what makes us human and so on. So Socrates, one of the greatest philosophers of Ancient Greece, used this method. He would draw to himself many of the young men of Athens, and encourage them to ask questions. And through a series of questions and counter-questions, he would gradually lead them, logically and step by step, to discover the answers.

### **English textbooks: Pedagogic Tools and Functions**

In the course curriculum from grades 1-8 there were quite a few noticeable features that were appreciable. The first item is the choice and selection of the chapters which were a mix of classic pieces along with some contemporary pieces developed by the authors. Before launching upon a detailed analysis of the selection of chapters/reading material used, suffice it to say that most of the exercises that have been developed based on usage, grammar and composition, demonstrate intelligent utilisation of the reading material. The pedagogic function of these chapters becomes quite clear when one realises the gradual but systematic and cumulative build-up of the language component across the different grades. There is a level of internal coherence and thematic unity that is evident in the systematic build-up from Grade 1 to 2 and so on. The thread of continuity is visible in several chapters. This attempt to build up themes at different levels of maturity and understanding is a sound pedagogic practice.



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Some of the issues about which writers have to be sensitised are at two levels at least: one at the ideological level and the other at the level of metanarrative. Thus, in the later grades, the idea of including chapters on national flags, Independence Day and nationalistic sentiments, while invoking feelings and notions of patriotism should also suggest the porosity, the constructedness of borders and boundaries, rather than suggesting xenophobia/jingoism. There is a thin fine line that separates the two and that should emerge in the discourse. One way to tackle this problem is to include readings like Shiv Kumar's poem on "Border Guards" (Class 12) in a later grade. At a more complex level, there is Wilfrid Owen's "Strange Meeting." As authors and editors, we can consciously seek to introduce pieces on pacifism. Both Shaw's 'Arms and the Man' and Aristophanes 'Lysistrata' for later grades and high school are relevant texts, if maybe a little too long.

Secondly, the question of health and hygiene which has acquired tremendous resonance in the pandemic context could also provide a window to different modes of belief about health and hygiene which are culturally relative, for instance of the practice of smearing mud on huts and of using cow-dung as a cleaning agent. This in turn could set the stage and prepare the student for an introduction to tribal/rural life, belief and worldview instead of imbibing homogeneous ideas about modernity. Similarly, the chapters on hygiene which have been included across a couple of grades, can be used to develop their ideas and understanding about hygiene in a way where there is a cumulative build-up. The piece on "Manual Scavenging" could be used to interrogate notions and ideas about hygiene. As a matter of fact, this chapter could be used to generate a debate on ideas of 'cleanliness.' Sensitization to issues hitherto shrouded in silence is a very vital ingredient of our education. The educator could ask the students if making a documentary film on this issue is a good idea, in order to call attention to this spectacle of abjection? Or is it an instance of "poverty tourism", especially if such a film were to be shown outside India? Wherever possible, it might be a good idea to have the students debate on the topic.

Advertisements on fairness creams is a prickly and tricky issue and again a debate, oral or written, could be used as a pedagogic tool. On the one hand, the learner could develop his/her argument about the racist implications of such advertisements. On the other hand, the contrary view could develop the theme of freedom of choice, free market

etcetera. This chapter could also be used to generate a discussion about the “beauty” practices of different social groups and communities.

The continuity of theme is evident in the choice of a piece like “The Why-Why Girl” in Grade 5 and “Bholi” in Grade 6. The education of the girl child is obviously a vital issue and needs to be foregrounded. Similarly, sensitivity towards and understanding of other cultures, different ways of life, issues to do with environment, should be fully evident in the choice of texts. Another reading practice which encourages active engagement is where readers are encouraged to make analogies and read in an interconnected way. Classroom teaching and pedagogical exercises could be calibrated to develop this method of reading where the learner could learn to perceive interlinkages and could be encouraged to compare and contrast different ways of dealing with similar issues. Thus ‘The Why-Why Girl’ can be read in tandem with K.A. Abbas’s story ‘Bholi’ (<https://ncert.nic.in>jefp109>) develops the idea that it is important to educate the girl child.

The chapter on Food and Food Reviewing could be utilised as a launch pad to generate vocabulary exercises where the learners learn words, methods and processes associated with cooking, names of different ingredients, the food items of different regions and countries. Also, an oral exercise could be carried out where students describe the recipe of a favoured food item. This speaking exercise can be devised as a role play where they enact the role of a chef or a TV celebrity chef. The exercise of narrating a recipe is dependent on and encourages sequential thinking, using appropriate connectors, conjunctions and adverbs as well as alerting the learners to acquaint themselves with the manifold tasks associated with cooking.

Underlying literature teaching there is the idea of a value-based humanism. However, if we transact the concept or idea of “Heroism and the Human Spirit” uncritically through Rudyard Kipling’s “If”, we might fall into a trap of seeming to propound hegemonic masculinity. While conceding the declamatory value and literary merits of the poem, one might have a couple of caveats or reservations about this piece. Kipling’s undeniable imperialism made its way into my critical judgments. So, the key sentence that the poem ends with, “you will be a man, my friend” was problematic when viewed from the lens of empire, race and gender. As an articulation of the assertion of the

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human spirit and heroism, the poem seemed a little dated, and limited in its universal applicability. Also in question was its confidence in its hegemonic masculinity. I found that the digital assets related to the poem focused on values, good manners and principles, all of which is of course appreciable and a necessary part of literature's ethical content. Perhaps discussion could be used to generate some questions about the finality of values and principles.

In the world that we live in, it is increasingly evident that we need to invoke our own humanity in multiple ways and learn to understand and accept other ways of being. Textbooks and digital material that help inculcate sensitivity and reflexivity are an invaluable resource in this context, imparted by teachers trained to both teach and arouse the joy of learning. Curiosity need not kill the cat, but arouse in learners the desire to ask more and more questions, which can lay the foundation for education beyond literacy. The claims and vision of NEP would then truly be realized and actualized.

**Author Bionote:** *Dr Meenakshi Malhotra is an Associate Professor of English at Hansraj College, Delhi University. She has edited Representing the Self and Claiming the I. She has published articles on life-writing as an archive for Gender and Women's Studies, Women and Gender Studies in India: Crossings (Routledge, 2019), on "Subjugated Knowledges and Emergent Voices" in Revolving around Indias (Cambridge Publishers, 2020). The Engendering of Hurt" in The State of Hurt, (Sage, 2016), on 'Reconceptualising the Subject in Queer Theory" in Ways of Seeing/Ways of Queering, (Interdisciplinary Press, 2016), on Kali in Unveiling Desire, (Rutgers University Press, 2018) and 'Ecofeminism and its Discontents' (Primus, 2018). She has been part of curriculum development teams with several universities, a consultant for school textbooks, visiting faculty at Grinnell College, Iowa and University of Minnesota at Duluth and more recently (2021) a Nalanda Studies Fellow.*

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