

## What Has Literacy Got to Do with Sexuality Education?

*Parul Malik*

### **Abstract**

This article attempts to establish the connection between young people's literacy practices and Sexuality Education based on two examples from a doctoral study. Through print and digital advertisements analysis, girls and boys from three Shelter Homes for street children critically read authentic texts to engage with ideas of gender, body image, companionship, and others.

**Keywords:** Critical sexuality education, critical literacy, young people, popular culture, authentic texts

### **Introduction**

When the Hindi film *Kabir Singh* came out, it drew mixed responses in the larger public discourse and from people one knows. Peers and scholars of gender and sexuality saw it as misogynistic with heavy doses of toxic masculinity. Parents of young children and teenagers felt concerned that it could be a 'bad' influence. While several adolescent students themselves put up display pictures on their social media handles emulating the male protagonist and changed their status messages to popular dialogues from the film. Significantly amongst a range of other interesting possibilities, the film had the potential to critically engage students on how popular culture affects their performances of gender or shapes their aspirations of romantic relationships. Having been a middle-school teacher and a researcher of sexuality in education, one wondered if spaces could be created within our classrooms to do that. Conversely, if education aims to prepare students for their lives outside, how far are such media and issues a part of their everyday lives at school?

Sexuality Education is often associated with a one-off session about reproductive health or the Science periods where genitals are taught. The purpose of Sexuality Education, however, is not only to inform children about biological processes, but to comprehensively engage them on ideas ranging from gender identities and roles, sexual and gender-based violence, to how bodies are socially imagined, interpersonal relationships forged, emotions, fantasies and desires negotiated, and many others (UNESCO et al., 2018). It is also understood critically (Bay-Cheng, 2017; Sanjakdar et al., 2015) with an emphasis on equity and social justice, for instance, in building more robust advocacy for children's rights to reproductive and sexual health information and services, challenging sexism at school, at home, in public spaces, or claiming one's body as rightfully theirs without any fear of violation and discrimination. Pedagogically this could imply critically reading about our lives and worlds—of which popular and social media in contemporary times is an integral component.

To develop discussions and sessions with diverse learners, practitioners of sexuality have to often look for good quality materials or create their own. In my doctoral research, apart from the materials available through civil society organizations, I used Bollywood songs, newspapers and magazines, television advertisements, and digital content contributed by children from their social media spaces. The choice of materials is always a significant decision. It has to multimodally engage children, be closer to their lives and cultural contexts, encourage them to inquire and reflect, and creatively enable critical explorations. This is roughly the premise on which Ashcraft (2012) connects critical literacy/new literacies and Sexuality Education. The socio-political nature of literacy enables students to read, and produce texts, discourses or narratives with keen attention to issues of identity, power and inequity, vis-à-vis sexuality. Challenging structures or social relations that perpetuate discrimination and maintain the status quo becomes a part of literacy instruction and learning.

We know that literacy happens in the real world and everyday authentic texts have the potential to become rich resources in the classrooms, whereby interlinkages between 'school' and 'out-of-school' literacies become pronounced (Brouard et al., 1999). Several texts we encounter each day—from print to popular media, billboards to television shows—are embedded with overt to subtle messages about sexuality.

For instance, think about how toys for girls and boys are differently marketed, films, songs and reality television shows scripted, what posters behind autorickshaws say, what artwork on walls in public spaces portray, and so on, such that students' political agency and future opportunities in life are strengthened. Practitioners and researchers of literacy pedagogy also posit that young people's interest in sexuality can benefit not only sexual identity development but also their academic development in many subjects, including literacy development (Ashcraft, 2009). Therefore, we can 'hijack' literacy teaching (Comber et al., 2001) for Sexuality Education and vice versa, which may otherwise not be possible in our classrooms, schools, and children's lives.

In the following sections of this article, I have detailed two examples of hands-on work with a group of adolescents using everyday texts from a more extensive doctoral study about Critical Sexuality Education. Subsequently, I suggest how Sexuality Education can be interwoven with literacy pedagogy and practices through some interventions that teachers can try out to connect classroom learning with their students' lives and worlds.

### **Who Were the Participants?**

The examples detailed here are from a session organized with adolescent girls and boys living at Shelter Homes run by a non-governmental organization in Delhi. The children restored to these Homes had once lived on the streets and experienced extreme poverty and hunger, escaped abusive, alcoholic or irresponsible adults, and survived instances of sexual violence. The organization that manages the Homes had been making efforts to engage them on ideas of gender and sexuality, and the participants in the session had a prior understanding of these concepts.

About forty senior girls and boys in the 16-18 age group had come together from three Homes for the session. They were divided into mixed-gender groups of six to seven each and provided materials for analysis, such as newspapers, magazines and television advertisements downloaded to a pen drive. In the first activity, groups worked on representations of gender in digital and print advertisements. In the second, they analysed matrimonial advertisements appearing in the classifieds section of newspapers to arrive at complex societal and personal discussions about love and companionship. After working on the materials in their groups, they had to make oral and artistic presentations to other groups using

their discussion notes, collages and charts (Image 1). Their peers could ask them questions, make further observations or extend each other's analyses through added inputs.

### Image 1 : Working with Advertisements

Meanwhile, the author-researcher and the Homes' counsellors facilitated the entire process, moved from group to group supporting the participants, and moderated the exchange of ideas during intra and inter-group discussions.

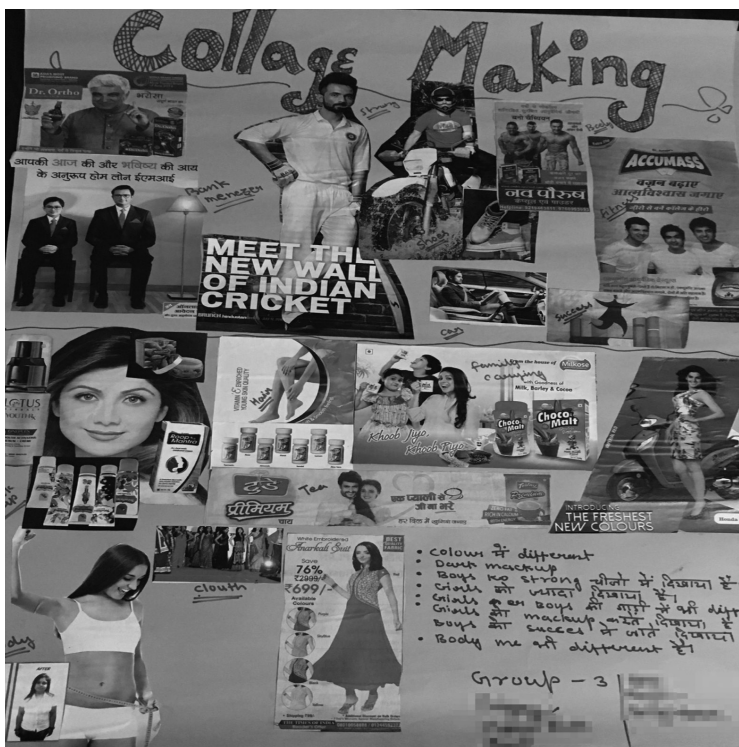


#### *Activity 1, Calling Out Biases*

In their critical analysis of print and digital advertisements using a gender lens, most groups problematised stereotypical feminine and masculine scripts and projected 'unreal' beauty standards. The participants critiqued that women were compelled through the advertisements to be 'fair-fair, look beautiful...with a model-like figure'. This appearance was in tune with the ways images are edited for a 'flawless' look, so much so that sometimes female models' underarms and knees are inadvertently erased. The participants pointed out that the idea of fairness as beautiful

is deeply engrained in our minds. One group created a collage to emphasize how images of ‘sexy’ bodies, sporting upper-class branded dresses and accessories, were invariably advanced in advertisements (Image 2). They further observed a generic difference in colours representing ‘softer’ feminine and ‘stronger’ masculine products and that women’s ‘charm’ is used to sell products, amongst other ideas.

Image 2: What Advertisements Say to Us



On the range of gender representation, participants remarked that girls and women were shown doing domestic chores, or selling home maintenance, beauty and family/child care products, such as makeup, water filters, detergents, cooking oils, ready-made meals to eat snacks or diapers. They exclaimed that some ‘high personality’ actors can be seen endorsing misrepresentations, such as the fact that feminine domestic ‘duties’ and nurturance are light, comfortable, and enjoyable. They added, ‘kitchen work is shown like it only suits women...taking care of children also’, and that ‘girls are considered to be washing machines’.

The participants noted overt sexism to be apparent in advertisements, such that, 'girls are shown to be doing make-up, whereas boys are shown to be heading into success'. They also pointed out that men, in contrast to women, appeared on private and government advertisements for banking, IT, insurance and automobiles, validating their 'work' outside the home: 'job, office, outdoor work, men can be seen doing'. Most images of men in these advertisements, they critiqued, showed the 'appropriate' ways to be 'masculine, such as a prominent Bollywood actor selling a cold drink through dangerous stunts.

Overall, the participants could co-construct meanings with their peers, produce their own media and coherently express the collated ideas. They could decode how normative forms of 'femininity' or 'masculinity' constitute and are constituted by media images and scripts in everyday lives. At a personal level, a reassessment of ideas could be initiated about what perceptions of our bodies should be, why some celebrities are idolized and coveted, or how class disparities are incentivized through 'branded' fashion. An atmosphere of excitement, camaraderie, purposefulness and confidence pervaded throughout the activity.

#### *Activity 2, Desiring Equitable Companionship*

This activity was developed around young people's aspirations of romantic companionship. One of the premises of this activity was that the Shelter Home children are expected to begin an independent life on turning eighteen. As they have lived in single-sex Homes in close groups for very long, the Homes' counsellors felt a session would help to facilitate their interactions with other boys and girls and benefit their communication and emotional skills. Some participants expressed the desire to learn more about romantic partnerships and forge mutually respectful and long-term companionships during our prior interactions.

While this activity brought in the participants' understanding of a 'suitable' life partner and emphasized their agency in love decisions, it also helped pose larger critical questions about society and culture. Similar to the first activity, small mixed-gender groups studied 'Groom Wanted' and 'Bride Wanted' advertisements from Hindi newspapers and then created their own seeking a desirable 'match'. Image 3 shows some ideas put together by one of the groups in the form of a poster. We were hoping to support them in building and embracing values of respect, equity, trust, and consent.

Image 3: Who is My Life Partner?



Most participants were dismissive about arbitrary demands based on caste, religion, 'looks without brain' or wealth. One group described such an advertisement as 'stereotype thinking' since it sought a bride who 'should be beautiful, virtuous, Punjabi, earns this much, is fair, should be from this town, should have this religion'.

Participants' advertisements defined their desires for a lifelong companionship. One group's version of a 'desirable groom', for instance, was that he should be 'beautiful, educated, well settled, jealousy not, loving, caring, medium height, fit, healthy (sic)'. The discussions that followed were very lively and tackled a range of sexist arguments. For instance, boys of one group were quizzed about their stance on physical and sexual ties in companionate relationships because they had suggested that they wanted a partner 'who agreed to make love' without much protest. The retort, especially by girls of other groups, very pointedly compelled them to reassess their language denoting 'ownership' over someone instead of 'companionship' with them. One girl asked, 'Will you forcefully build a [sexual] relationship?'. Another asserted, 'Can only boys beat up others?'. To which a boy from the presenting group sheepishly re-evaluated his position and suggested: 'I will not force her. I will wait'.

Another group's presentation demonstrated other interesting standpoints about girls' agency and personhood in their relationships and position in society. Group 4's (Grp 4) 'desirable bride' was conceived as someone who is 'educated, [prefers a] small family, loving, caring, respectful, trusted, medium height, friendly, good looking, who never drinks... accepts [any] caste (sic)'. In the following excerpt, girls of various groups 'chided' the boys of group 4 to reassess their misogynistic worldviews:

*Girl 1:* Why have you asked for good looks [in a girl]?

*Grp 4 Girl:* Boys had said.

*Grp 4 Boy:* [explaining] How will you take her along? How will you take her out?

*Girl 2:* She is not some luggage that you would carry her along!

*Grp 4 Boy:* What will society, neighbours say?

*Girl 3:* Society will be with you only till a certain time. If tomorrow someone harasses me and people say that I have brought dishonour, will he listen to society? My partner should support me!

The participants engaged in lively and respectful dialogues as they negotiated to arrive at some mutual resolutions. For instance, they managed to problematize the disproportionate ways patriarchal mind sets affect girls and boys of a similar age group. Girls claimed the stage when boys expressed stereotypical 'expectations' of their companions, similar to the newspaper advertisements they had initially critiqued. They monopolized the discussion to compel boys to un-learn their regressive perspectives. They also demonstrated non-negotiability to sexist compulsions that their partners or society may make on their bodies, desires and aspirations. The young participants assertively expressed through the activity who *they* saw as a companion for life, instead of what their elders or society mandated as an 'ideal' match. This form of negotiation was important, especially for girls, who otherwise may not have many opportunities for private expressions. In their strong desires for equity, claim over equal rights and vision of a more just society, the participants also supported each other's aspirations and demonstrated capacities for transformative change.

### **Shaping our Lives and Worlds**

For the teaching of literacy to be critical, relevant and meaningful—beyond a decontextualized composite of skills—it needs to connect



with students' lived realities and address issues pertaining to identity, power, privilege, access, rights and others (Janks, 2010; Luke & Woods, 2009). The above examples from a study on Sexuality Education can be adapted to a literacy classroom where students can engage with popular and authentic texts. They can similarly build deeper, political understandings about a range of ideas that emerge from and directly translate into examining their immediate lives.

Literacy teachers can explore other authentic texts as sexuality resources in the classroom. Some of these could be signs and symbols in public places, descriptions and images on routine products (such as toys, kitchen appliances, hardware, food packaging, cosmetics and toiletries), instruction manuals for appliances, cookbooks, travel maps, more recently the layout of mobile phone apps, and many more. Furthermore, students can be guided to undertake extended hands-on research projects that culminate in producing their own texts. These could include authentic engagements, like interviewing experts about sexual and reproductive health rights and transcribing it, drawing interactive safety maps of school and out of school spaces, producing dramas/short films about romantic relationships and consent, or putting together photo-essays on gender stereotypes.

School assemblies and *bal-melas* can be organized to disseminate these projects' findings amongst peers or even parents. Students can compile small information booklets around ideas felt to be relevant for their age group, like body image issues, romance, and heterosocial friendships could be some choices for adolescents. Teachers can meanwhile curate reading materials around these themes, and literacy classes can help build supportive practices in ways that underline children's voice and agency. Teachers and practitioners need to perform the role of a facilitator during such participatory engagements to demonstrate a good understanding of their learners, collaborate with and support them in their learning, curate diverse media, initiate dialogues on sensitive themes and negotiate conflicts. In schools where Sexuality Education classes are inadequate or missing, the creative potential of such projects is endless. They open windows for children to make meanings of their bodies, lives, identities and relationships. They enable a critical reading and re-reading of their worlds in ways that inspire children to nurture transformative visions and empathy confidently. A critical review of *Kabir Singh* could perhaps be successfully undertaken within such a classroom.

## References

- Ashcraft, C. (2009). Literacy and sexuality: What's the connection? *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 52(7), 636-638.
- Ashcraft, C. (2012). But how do we talk about it?: Critical literacy practices for addressing sexuality with youth. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 42(5), 597-628.
- Bay-Cheng, L.Y. (2017). Critically sex/ed: Asking critical questions of neoliberal truths in sexuality education. In Louisa Allen and Mary Lou Rasmussen (Eds). *The Palgrave handbook of sexuality education* (pp. 343-367). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Brouard, A., Wilkinson, L., & Stein, P. (1999). 'Literacy is all around us': Literacy, ethnography and curriculum 2005 in three Johannesburg classrooms. *Southern African Journal of Applied Language Studies*, 7:1, 1-26 (published online 2012).
- Comber, B., Thomson, P., & Wells, M. (2001). Critical literacy finds a 'Place': Writing and social action in a low-income Australian grade 2/3 classroom. *The Elementary School Journal*, 101(4), 451-464.
- Janks, H. (2010). *Literacy and power*. Routledge.
- Luke, A. & Woods, A. (2009). Critical literacies in schools: A primer. *Voices from the Middle*, 17(2), 9-18.
- Sanjakdar, F., Allen, L., Rasmussen, M.L., Quinlivan, K., Brömdal, A., & Aspin, C. (2015). In search of critical pedagogy in sexuality education: Visions, imaginations, and paradoxes. *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 37(1), 53-70.
- UNESCO, UNAIDS, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women & WHO (2018). *International technical guidance on sexuality education: An evidence-informed approach (revised edition)*. UNESCO.

*Parul Malik* is a doctoral student at Delhi University's Department of Education (CIE). Her research explores varied dimensions of sexuality with children from different backgrounds, in and out of school contexts, using participatory and peer education interventions.  
parulmalik0@yahoo.co.in