

## **Construction of Hegemonic Femininity and Masculinity in Upper Primary School Textbooks: A Study on SCERT Textbooks of Classes 5 to 7**

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Establishing gender norms through textbooks may have a detrimental influence on the formation of gender identity in students. The research aims to investigate the conceptual creation of masculinity and femininity in textbooks framed by SCERT for upper primary school children in Kerala. This research article analyses the conceptual construction of femininity and masculinity in upper primary school textbooks based on two feminist perspectives, Judith Butler's gender performativity, and Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism. The analysis reveals that though the state government has made considerable effort to revise and audit the textbooks to promote gender equality and equal rights in the state, there are still instances of gender inequity in the books. Despite recent gender-equalizing developments, textbooks continue to teach dominant gender concepts, encouraging young pupils to adopt conventional gender norms.

**Keywords:** Gender hegemony, gender performativity, agency, femininity, masculinity, textbooks

### **Background**

The second-wave feminists of the early 1960s affirmed that the institutional structure of education operated as a "propagative mechanism" for societal inequities since instructional strategies were firmly related to patriarchy. This theory sparked a significant, feminism-centred research agenda for education. The present article focuses on the construction of hegemonic femininity in textbooks, as educational content, strategies, and most classroom activities are based on textbooks. According to

Brugeilles and Cromer, “textbooks have economic and ideological implications” beyond their educational significance and are “a basic vehicle of socialization, conveying knowledge and values” (2009, p. 7). School textbooks have a crucial role in shaping individuals as they reflect the values and politics of our society. “Children develop gender-role identities during their early years, and one factor that influences this identity is the literature that children read” (Tsao, 2008). Gender-normative portrayals in textbooks, according to feminist scholars, may negatively affect children’s perceptions of gender, goals for their future careers, and sense of self.

This study illustrates how patriarchy’s conventional performance of gender roles and continuous performativity interpret the notion of being a woman and make women subject to male supremacy through the study of narratives and the use of the feminist theories of Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir. English textbooks for primary level classes (Classes 1 to 4) prepared by SCERT, Kerala, are analyzed for this purpose.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Two feminist perspectives essentially define the critical parameters of this research. These are Judith Butler’s gender performativity and Simone de Beauvoir’s existentialist feminism. These two theories are mutually dependent. The much-lauded argument made by the female existentialist philosopher Beauvoir was that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (1997, p. 17). The traditional conception of a woman has been created and affirmed by the patriarchal rhetoric of society. Standardizing the feminine has caused the oppression of women by the patriarchal system for generations. According to her, “patriarchy relies on the myth of women’s essential immanence and her otherness in constructing male subjectivity” (Leitch, 2001, pp. 1403-14). The foundation of Judith Butler’s thesis is the notion that neither gender nor even supposedly “biological” sex is inherent or organic. In ‘Gender Trouble’, she states, “gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender’s performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination...” (Leitch, 2001, p. 2501).

## Literature Review

There is limited literature on gender discourse, zooming on primary school English textbooks in India. Bhog and Ghose, in *Writing Gender In: Reflections on Writing Middle-School Political Science Textbooks in India*, give a brief summary of the policy framework around gender, curriculum, and textbooks. They also discuss their experiences tackling some challenges while writing new political science textbooks for middle school students (2014). According to Shobhita Rajagopal's analysis of high school textbooks in the Indian state of Rajasthan, the inadequate representation of women is glaringly apparent in all texts and all subjects (2009, p. 32). To sum up the argument, it is asserted that most research looking at gender discrimination in textbooks has come to the same general conclusion: "Gender biased images remain strongly present in school textbooks throughout the world" (2009, p. 169). Despite the Indian government's emphasis on eradicating gender disparities and sex stereotypes from textbooks, according to Firoz Bakht Ahmed, representations of women in textbooks include doing household chores (2006). According to Kalia's study of the textbooks used in India, women were totally excluded from 344 of the 465 jobs mentioned in the books. She asserts that gender prejudices in textbooks shape children's gender-related attitudes, particularly if the instructor reinforces them (1986, pp. 52-54). The literature on the critical study of the English textbooks used in Kerala's upper primary classes is not found, nonetheless.

## Discussion

The section discusses the problems related to gender roles and sexism as depicted in Kerala SCERT English textbooks of the upper primary sections (Classes 5 to 7). It is found that there is inequality in the representation of women in the working sector compared to men in all the SCERT English textbooks from Classes 5 to 7. Class 5, Part 1 textbook opens with an African folktale, "The Island", where the protagonist is a fisherman and his wife a homemaker, who is presented as someone existing in household premises (pp. 11-12). In the same unit, in activity 4, which requires students to identify the occupations from given pictures, fourteen of the service roles are done by men, and women do only four. There are numerous instances in all the textbooks where the woman is seen in the domestic spaces, and the man is mostly presented as part of the society's working class. There is hardly any situation in the textbooks

where the female protagonist goes to work, and the male remains in the domestic space. Through internalization of the prescribed gender role defined by patriarchal hegemony, these images promote in learners a false picture of the 'ideal woman'.

Instances of gender disparities can be seen throughout the textbooks. In the extended reading section of Unit 1, "The Mirror" of Part 1, Class 5 textbook, the mother calls the children for dinner (p. 17). In Unit 2, Letter to God written by Gregorio Lopez Fuentes, the woman is seen preparing supper and Lencho, the protagonist, is a farmer (p. 38). In the poem "Woman Work" by Maya Angelou, given in Unit 2- "Still We Rise" of the same textbook, only the freedom provided by nature provides the speaker with a moment of a break from the responsibilities of cooking, cleaning, picking cotton, cutting sugar cane, and taking care of everyone around her. Though the unit aims to give the learners ideas regarding women's empowerment, the learners are given even more representations of women in domestic spaces (p. 57). The father comes to the scene from the office, whereas the mother exists in the household in Unit 5—"Helping Hands" in Part 2, Class 6 textbook. Polya is a responsible government official, whereas his wife is an illiterate woman in the short story "Polya", given for study in Part 1 of the Class 7 textbook. However, instances of a male family member existing in a domestic space and the woman being part of the working class are minimal or not found at all.

Numerous instances show distinct segmentations of "performativity" based on sex and gender roles. The mother in Unit 4—"Happy Prince" in Part 2, Class 5 textbook, is cleaning dishes, pots, and pan in the kitchen, whereas the man is trying to finish writing a play (p. 117). In Unit 1, "Rain of Love", of Class 6, Part 1 text, the grandfather and uncle look after the fields and gardens, whereas the grandmother takes care of the grandson. In the same section, in the story "Making A Mango Pickle", the 11-year-old daughter Durga is asked to check on the calf and watch it, whereas her brother Apu passively watches the cow being milked. Unit 4—"Work is Worship" in Part 2, Class 6 textbook contains an introductory section where the learners are asked questions like "Who does the work at home?", and "What are these people doing?" (p. 105) after observing the pictures given at the right. The man is found digging up the soil with a spade, whereas the mother washes soiled clothes. In Unit 5—"Helping Hands" in the same text, the illustration of the icnic

in “The Champ” shows all the family members engaged in activities like swimming, reading, talking, etc, whereas the mother manages the food (p. 138). Activity 12 of Unit 2- “Tales and Time” in Part 1, Class 7 textbook, is to edit and rewrite a given paragraph. The paragraph says about Kalyani’s decision to participate in a payasam (a dessert in Kerala)- making contest, and many women being gathered there (p. 66). A cooking contest is presented as an event exclusively related to women. In Unit 3— “Man and Media” of the same textbook, a cartoon is given where the boy prefers to watch a cricket match, whereas the women prefer to watch serials, cartoons, and the *Ramayana*. Thus, ideologies that portray cooking, serving, cleaning, and child-rearing as feminine impulses and activities that require intellectual inputs, physical strength, adventure, and leisure as masculine prerogatives, on the other hand, end up functioning as the building blocks of patriarchal hegemony both inside families and outside in society. By repeatedly acting out traditional gender roles allocated to women by the patriarchal order, the women characters would develop into the perfect wife and obedient housewives to the likes of the male characters. In this way, patriarchal hegemony establishes ideology regarding the gendered division of labour as the norm in the family and social sphere.

Other instances of hegemonic femininity and emphasized masculinity can be seen in instances like the mother asking her son to be like the Happy Prince who “never cries for anything” (p. 112), in Unit 4— “The Happy Prince” of Part 2, Class 5 textbook. In the same section, an activity requires learners to look at given pictures and combine given sentences. The sentence groups are “The frock is very small. The girl cannot wear it.”, and “The river is very wide. The boy cannot cross it.” Physical audacity, struggle, and adventure are the entitlements of the patriarchal structure, as seen in the above instances. On the other hand, kindness, quiet nature, shyness, timidity, compassion, etc, are female virtues in the structure. In Unit 4— “Rhythms of Life” in Part 2, Class 7 textbook, there is an activity that requires the learners to fill in a given conversation. The conversation is between Diana, a banker, and Swapna, her friend. When Diana says that her fiancé works in Australia, Swapna asks if she would relocate to Australia after marriage. This further reinforces hegemonic femininity in the learners’ minds, where an ideal woman is expected to adjust to her husband’s career situations, nullifying her own career.

## Conclusion

A review of SCERT-framed textbooks for upper primary school students in Kerala demonstrates that school books buttress anachronistic norms of gender, and femininity and masculinity are, predictably, formed through narratives in a binary structure. Indications of male supremacy have been discerned regarding gender roles in the household. Females, in particular, are usually represented in a delineated home realm as caregivers, mothers, and homemakers. While femininity in textbooks is typically connected with tasks like cooking, caring for children, and purchasing domestic items, masculinity is seldom, if ever, associated with similar activities. On the other hand, male characters are income producers endowed with power and authority.

School manuals and literature meant for children also promote gender differences in the realm of the workforce; for example, the social categorization of labour as “men’s work or women’s work” (Carrigan, Connell & Lee 1987, p. 94), and the designation of some types of jobs as more masculine than others. This study shows that textbooks fail to demolish patriarchy, and despite recent gender-equalizing advances, textbooks continue to propagate prevailing gender conceptions, urging young students to embrace traditional gender relations.

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