



Monstrous Wives and Naïve Daughters: Ideological Insulation and Detrimental Depiction of Women in Select *Panchatantra* Stories

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Abstract

The paper examines the pervasive presence of misogynistic themes and pejorative portrayal of women in the tales of Panchatantra, shedding light on their potential impact on young readers' perceptions of gender. Through the lens of gender studies, the analysis unveils underlying patriarchal ideologies and power dynamics at play. The study will elucidate how these tales, while intended to impart moral lessons to children, often perpetuate regressive stereotypes, constraining the perception of women as secondary and passive characters. By showcasing the bias of a male authorship, this study employs Perry Nodleman's concept of "ideological insulation" to expose how the text neutralizes female agency and constructs a deeply distorted and subjugated image of women. By interrogating the underlying power structures embedded in these stories, the analysis reveals the complex societal biases that shape and strengthen these gender roles. Ultimately, the study exposes the aesthetic and pedagogical mechanisms that render female subjugation invisible, suggesting that Panchatantra, beneath its surface of innocent storytelling, becomes a powerful site for reproducing patriarchal hegemony. The paper advocates for a paradigm shift in children's literature and calls for the breakage of prejudicial canon.

Keywords: Children's Literature in India, Gender Studies, Panchatantra, Stereotyping Women, Misogyny.

Introduction

Representation of women in children's literature has always been a contested discourse. The ways in which women's image is produced, reinforced, and shaped, readers are often left with

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a distorted perception of women's roles and identities. What makes this issue so contentious is that these books are specifically written for young readers like children, who are naturally impressionable and internalize the messages presented to them. Such misogynist children's tales influence a child's way of processing societal factors, ranging from caste, class, race to sex and gender. Using Perry Nodleman's idea of "ideological insulation", this paper argues that the text is governed by an adult male authorial gaze that shapes feminine presence in ways that appear natural yet are carefully controlled. Scholars have predominantly approached *Panchatantra* as a repository of political wisdom, and moral instruction. In his chapter "Once Upon a Time", Dasgupta talks about societal norms and mores and how they "lay the basis for good citizens" (Dasgupta, 1995, p.2). Over the years, numerous studies and analyses have shed light on the pervasive presence of gender stereotyping and the striking under-representation of female characters within these narratives (Hertel, 1908; Olivelle, 2009). Modern translations by Patrick Olivelle (2009) reframed the text as an ocean of "folk wisdom", emphasizing its negotiation between ethics, pragmatic political strategy, and morality. Chronologically, this mechanism of 'ideological insulation' and distortion do not begin with modern children's publishing but is foundational to ancient creation of myths and classical epic traditions that have long served as primary tools for moral socialization. In similar vein, M. Doretta Cornell (2005) demonstrates how the archetypal figure of Eve has been framed as a primordial woman, the source of human downfall, and temptation since literary and theological histories. Apart from religious texts, pedagogical literature such as nursery rhymes has also played a detrimental role. As scholars like Donlan (1972), Rowe (1979), and Al-Ramahi (2013) demonstrate, these foundational cultural narratives and nursery rhymes rely on deep-seated linguistic and cultural biases by flattening female identity into rigid archetypes of passivity and folly to train young minds into patriarchal compliance. By the 19th century, classics like Carlo Collodi's *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (1883) shifted this insulation into anthropomorphic and spiritual realms; as Rebecca Williams observes the near-total erasure of embodied, complex maternal figures. Similarly, Lewis Carroll's Alice's *Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), while centring on inquisitive female protagonist, ultimately constructs adult female authority through grotesque and caricatured figures of Queen of Hearts, thereby insulating young readers.

Classical Indian epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* constructed female identity through rigid social binaries. In the *Ramayana*, Sita is idealized as a submissive wife, while Surpanakha is punished for her "voice" and assertion of "desire", her "monstrous" framing synchronizing her physical demeanour with her transgressive actions. Similarly, the epic *Mahabharata* displaces assertive female desire onto marginal figures like Hidimba and Ulupi, distancing them from normative womanhood and social order. In India, from fables of *Panchatantra*, *Jataka Tales*, and *Kathasaritsagara* to *Tenali Raman tales* and *Akbar-Birbal Tales*, the depiction of gender has been a subject of contention, reflecting and perpetuating societal norms and biases. Throughout these children's fables, women have consistently been portrayed negatively, often being subjugated. Several studies have contributed to this theme, for instance, Shinde (2015) asserts on the feminist perspective, Khire & Raskar (2022) comment on negative portrayal of women in these folktales, Trivedi (2023) and Bhatia (2024) talk about deprecating condition of gender in *Panchatantra*. Existing scholarship examines misogynistic representations primarily from adult feminist or ideological perspectives, often overlooking how these narratives, supposedly designed as didactic texts for young readers end up shaping a child's moral and gendered imagination. This study addresses this gap by conducting a focused thematic analysis of these three dimensions and by situating them within the framework of gender socialization.

The *Panchatantra*, an ancient Indian collection of animal fables, primarily aimed at imparting moral lessons. These tales often feature animal characters that engage in various situations and dilemmas, teaching valuable life lessons through their experiences. While the

tales within the *Panchatantra* are renowned for their moral lessons and entertaining narratives, they also offer a reflection of gender roles and stereotypes embedded within the society. The Indian society depicted in *Panchatantra* is ancient and paradoxical, characterized by rigid definitions and constraints on gender roles. Particularly, the representation of women in *Panchatantra* stories often conforms to traditional stereotypes, depicting them as ignorant, speechless, dumb as well as conspirators, and seductresses who do not follow ethics of life (Sharma, 2010). These tales differentiate between what is “feminine” and what is “non-feminine” behaviour for women, thus defining and outlining gender parameters. Gender in actual is a fluid realm, with no boundaries and limits but society has tailored it by defining its borders. Expanding upon the conceptualization on gender, Judith Butler in her book, *Gender Trouble* (1990), says that gender is not an inherent quality but rather a performance enacted through repeated behaviours and actions. In that context, such children’s literature tales dictate what “feminine” behaviour is accepted or rejected by society. This performance of gender is reinforced by children’s stories that are shaped by broader power dynamics and social structures.

Misogynistic remarks in the *Panchatantra* are evident through dialogues that reduce women to mere objects of desire, perpetuating harmful stereotypes about their worth and agency. Instead of directly addressing the female characters, certain dialogues in the stories employ language that objectifies and demeans women, reinforcing patriarchal attitudes. These stories altogether create a hostile image of women, which is unsuitable for young readers. In numerous stories, wives are depicted as cunning and greedy, daughters as passive and dependant, and mothers as gentle, nurturing, and unintelligent. Young wives are majorly depicted as overly sexual and persistently desirous. Vishnu Sharma, the author, advises men to stay away from such women as they are distractions from their path of virtue (Sharma, 1991). On the contrary, men in relationships are shown to be ideal, loving, and doting husbands, while women are seen as greedy, complaining, and demanding wives who are never satisfied by whatever men do (Trivedi, 2023). Most of these tales revolve around a male character, who bears moral values in the story; whereas women, on the other hand, are secondary characters in relation to men. The primary aim of this paper is to analyse the fabricated image and negative portrayal of women in a selection of tales, acting as a site of patriarchy. This study explores three dimensions of representation: women characterized as greedy and authoritative, their engagement in adultery, and the focus on appearance-based commentary regarding women.

Research Methodology

In recent decades, gender studies have emerged as critical framework for analysing literary texts, offering valuable insights into the construction, representation, and perpetuation of gender norms and power dynamics within cultural narratives. This research adopts an approach of Gender Studies to investigate the wrong depiction of women in *Panchatantra* stories for young readers. Gender studies aim to unveil the underlying patriarchal ideologies and their impact on shaping perceptions of gender roles and morality. Central to Gender Studies is the examination of how females as a gender are represented and the degree of agency afforded to them within the narrative framework, shedding light on power imbalances and ideological biases. Many theorists of Gender studies have written on construction of gender and the norms that usually accompany them. Although, both women and men are expected to behave according to these well-structured and normalized norms but women, particularly have always been consistently included in the discourse of gender studies by theorists.

Several scholars in gender studies have addressed the negative portrayal of women in literature. Feminist theorists such as Judith Butler, Bell hooks, Simone de Beauvoir and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have scrutinized the ways in which gender is constructed, reshaped, and twisted by societal norms and values. They argue that such portrayals not only limit the

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representation of women but also contribute to the reproduction of gender inequalities and biases in society. The study will analyse the *Panchatantra*'s selected stories from the lens of Gender Studies and will shed light on derogatory portrayal of women. The methodology focuses on utilizing gender studies to explore gender disparities within tales of *Panchatantra*, particularly within a society like India where women were not highly valued at that time. To bridge general feminist theory with the specific mechanics of children's literature, this study operationalizes Perry Nodelman's concept of "hidden adult" and "ideological insulation" (*The Hidden Adult*, 2008) as its core methodological framework. A common misconception of Nodelman's ideological insulation is that it merely shields the child reader from harsh realities. However, this study argues that in traditional pedagogical texts like the *Panchatantra*, insulation operates maliciously to protect patriarchal structures. Under the guise of creating an insulated, morally comprehensible universe for the impressionable child, the fables normalize the subjugation of women and this structured insulation trap female characters in detrimental roles. Nodelman (2016, p.267) asserts that children's literature is inherently didactic where "hidden adult voices" construct an insulated, artificial reality that works to deprive children of their individual voices in the name of an accepted childlikeness". Rather than viewing the text's derogatory portrayals as passive reflections of historical misogyny, this framework treats them as deliberate structural mechanisms engineered by the "hidden adult" to manipulate the reader's consciousness.

Monstrous Wives: Greed and Dominance

In the time old stories of *Panchatantra*, there are hardly any stories where women characters have some role to play. Women are designated with secondary roles in contrast to male characters and are, in fact, the targets of character assassination. The only positive trait accorded to women is that of motherhood, while other women, specifically wives are called 'ungrateful,' 'foolish,' 'greedy' and 'artful in cheating' (Trivedi, 2023). Multiple themes concerning the portrayal of women's image are woven throughout the tales of *Panchatantra*. The spectrum of motifs encompasses themes ranging from adultery to portraying women as deceitful, passive and dependant on men. Women's voice is silenced and the only voice that can be heard carries an imprint of bias from the "male" author, Vishnu Sharma.

The tales of *Panchatantra* have shown women as figures of dominance, who exert control over their husbands and compel them to engage in wrong actions. In the story, "The Crocodile and The Monkey," (p.381) the friendship of central characters is beautifully depicted but the crocodile's wife appears as a jealous, controlling, greedy and deceitful figure. From a Foucauldian perspective, these narratives function as power-coded yet subtle disciplinary mechanisms that produce and regulate subjectivities (Foucault, 1975). These subjectivities construct fragmented realities of gender and portray women as dominant and monstrous beings. Creed theorizes that female monstrosity emerges from patriarchal anxieties surrounding sexuality, authority, and bodily autonomy (1993, p.7). In the tale here, female crocodile is shown 'monstrous' and greedy as after tasting the delicious fruits brought by the monkey, she develops an insatiable desire for more and decides she wants to consume the monkey's heart. These desirous female characters are, so much so, a result of patriarchal anxieties because patriarchal discourse fears female desire as it exceeds masculine systems of control and judgement (Irigaray, 1985, p.28). Using her cunning and influence, female crocodile manipulates her husband to betray the strong bond of friendship between the crocodile and the monkey. Similarly, when discussing the role of wives in the tale of henpecked husbands, criticism towards women arises. They are depicted as having full control over their husbands' lives, often making unreasonable demands to satisfy their own whimsical desires. When Hideous Jaws' wife passes away, he is overcome with grief. However, Red Face mocks him, asserting that he always knew Hideous Jaws was dominated by his wife. Red Face suggests

that the death of a controlling wife should be celebrated, advising men to avoid the company of women if they seek happiness in this world. This construction encodes women through stereotypes that transform intelligence into deceit (Ellman, 1968, p.25). In the same thread, Red Face on hearing the news of Hideous Jaws' wife's death, comments:

A wife forever nagging

And falling in a rage,

Is not a wife, say sages,

But premature old age.

Therefore, with patient effort

Avoid the very name

Of every earthly woman,

If comfort be your aim... (Ryder, 1925, p. 411)

Such stories create a detrimental image of women in the minds of children, potentially leading them to develop biased perspectives. This is how children's books not only depict stereotypical gender but also 'manipulates' or influences a child's understanding of gender (Kortenhaus & Demarest, 1993), noting that female characters are frequently underrepresented or depicted in subordinate positions compared to males. The recurring construction of 'dominating' and 'greedy' wife in children's literature is neither accidental, nor innocuous. In texts such as the *Panchatantra*, female characters who exhibit cognitive agency through planning, plotting, and persuasion are reframed as manipulative or morally suspect. Nodelman's notion of 'hidden adult' substantially clarifies how such representations function: beneath the surface simplicity of these tales lies an androcentric cum authorial ideological framework that regulates how agency is to be interpreted. Thus, female agency and strategic thought are narrative red flags, coded as manipulative and morally corrupt, whereas a male agency enjoys seamless respect and acceptance for being logical and resourceful.

The Feminization of Adultery

The depiction of women as adulteresses, temptresses, and morally transgressive figures possesses a long history across both Western and Indian traditions. Eve from the book of Genesis; Pandora, Circe, and Medea from Greek mythology, and Surpanakha, Meneka, and Kaikeyi from Indian epics are the embodiments of desire, seduction, danger and moral instability since ages. In one of the *Panchatantra*'s tales named "A Weaver Cuts the Nose of a Bawd," or "The Weaver's Wife" (p.62), there are two married women depicted: one who engages in adultery, rushing to her lover as soon as her husband departs, while the other, known as the Bawd (Barber's wife), facilitates their illicit meetings. The weaver's wife skilfully deceives her husband into believing she is a virtuous spouse, while the Bawd manipulates the judges with a fabricated tale, endangering her husband's life. In the tale, husband is a drunkard but is still shown hospitable towards the guest while wife is called a 'whore' and is depicted as an adulteress, subjected to defamation. The critical issue extends beyond the overt plot of female infidelity; rather, it lies in why a text widely curated for children persistently deploys such deeply misogynistic tropes. The story is filled with verses that probably made "sense" to the author, as is his conviction before sharing:

When night is dark, And dark the day,

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When streets are mired, With sticky clay,
When husband lingers far away,
The flirt becomes supremely gay.
The wench cares not a straw to miss
The covered couch, the husband's kiss,
The pleasant bed; in place of this
She ever seeks a stolen bliss (Ryder, 1925, p.63)

As per Mary Ellman's ideas, literary traditions (here for that matter *Panchatantra*) redundantly and deliberately stereotype women as emotional, bodily, lustful, and excessive reducing femininity to uncontrolled appetite (1968, p.25). This theme of adultery and the cunning nature of women recurs in the story of the carpenter and his unfaithful wife in Book III, Story VI: "The Gullible Carpenter" (p. 349) where the story from its first sentence establishes a rigid binary opposition between the 'gullible' carpenter and his 'unfaithful whore' wife, setting a deliberate trap for how the reader perceives both characters. The husband's suspicion is entirely fuelled by public 'gossip', which the narrative and narrator treat as an undeniable cosmic fact. Through a brilliant, improvised lie, she exploits her innocent, gullible husband's simplicity by framing her indefinity as a blessing and sacrifice for her husband's long life. Vishnu Sharma reflects on this, remarking:

See the inherent flaws in women's essence:
Impurity, cold-hearted disdain,
Falsehood, recklessness, burning desire,
Excessive greed, and deception. (Ryder, 1925, p.68)

These words serve as evidence of the negative portrayal of women in such narratives. The author uses the term 'inherent flaws' to highlight the universal flaws of women as a gender. He asserts that such flaws like impurity, falsehood, and cold heartedness are intrinsic to women's essence. Moreover, the author includes additional phrases like 'burning desire' and 'excessive greed,' emphasising a sense of abundance or intensity in everything. These textual and linguistic choices degrade a female's agency, a phenomenon what feminist theorists like Simone de Beauvoir identify as the construction of woman as the absolute 'other'. Through this essentialist reduction, historically contingent patriarchal biases are neutralized as intrinsic biological truths. Chakravarti (2003) describes these historical biased anxieties as a byproduct of Brahmanical patriarchy, where female sexuality and independence are framed as discursively unruly forces. Terms like 'burning desire' and 'excessive greed' function as linguistic markers of monstrosity, transforming female into something nefarious. Through ideological insulation, the text deliberately restricts the reader's interpretive horizon. By embedding these highly misogynistic maxims with authoritative, religious, and pseudo-scientific or cosmic verses, the narrative effectively 'insulates' itself from critique and reprimand, thereby conditioning the target audience, here for that matter children. Such comments are added deliberately and are as follows:

The things that claw, and the things that gore

Are unreliable things;

And so is a man with sword in his hand,

And rivers, and women, and kings. (Ryder, 1925 p. 34)

Here, Vishnu Sharma characterizes women as unreliable beings who must not be trusted. Through the course of the tales in *Panchatantra*, he advises men to stay away from women because they are cunning and might deceive them. These tales and phrases caution men to be wary of women's deceitful motives. In one of the other stories, "The Farmer's Wife," a wife exhibits a shrewd behaviour by robbing her old and wealthy husband's money and eloping with a rogue, only to be deceived and abandoned. The greedy wife is compared to a female jackal's futile attempt to catch a fish, which was then snatched away by a vulture. She cynically remarked on jackal's misfortune, only to receive a mocking response about her predicament and animalizes female greed. In this tale too, woman is shaped as a greedy and adulteress character, whose misdeed and repercussions are taught as a 'moral' lesson to young children. Such female-demeaning tales shape children's perspectives negatively during their early cognitive development and such tales become a part of the institution, in Althusser's terms that reproduces 'ideology' (1971). These tales, stories, and "didactic" narratives function as ideological apparatuses that shape consciousness during formative stages of cognitive development. Another indication of this bias is the recurring equation of women as "vice". In "A Weaver's Wife" story (72), Victor says, "There are seven vices in the world, namely: Drink, women, hunting, scolding, dice, Greed, cruelty: these seven are vice." Consequently, such narratives do not merely reflect social attitudes, but actively shape, transmit, and insulate dominant patriarchal ideologies. Here, womanhood is not merely linked with vice but becomes ontologically synonymous with moral corruption and under the veneer of moral pedagogy, the text participates in the construction of gendered suspicion, shadowing children's perception of womanhood, femininity, and the 'female'.

Politics of appearance-centric portrayals

The representation of women through the prism of beauty, bodily appearance, and physical desirability has remained a persistent characteristic of patriarchal literary traditions across cultures. As John Berger famously observes in *Ways of seeing* (1972), "Men act and women appear" (p.47), showcasing a type of the only femininity that is constructed primarily through spectacle. In "The Farmer's Wife" story (Ryder, 1925, p. 412), the wife's only praised quality is her physical beauty, positioning her as an object of "male gaze". Excluding her only positive trait of beauty, she is depicted as a seductress, who is willing to deceive her husband and elope with a scoundrel, leaving him penniless. Despite being married and wealthy, the farmer's wife seeks other lovers due to her husband's old age. According to Audre Lorde, "The portrayal of women as objects of male desire perpetuates harmful stereotypes and contributes to the objectification and dehumanization of women." (Lorde, 2007). Such stories normalize that women's only role in life is to remain beautiful and give birth to beautiful children.

There is a scarcity of narratives featuring women in significant roles. For instance, in a story titled as "The Old Man and young Wife," (Ryder, 1925, p.341) women's only positive trait is her external beauty and how 'young' and 'youthful' her presence is. She is depicted as an unsatisfied, young, and pretty wife who is not happy with her wealthy husband because he is old and ugly. Such normalized illustrations create a fabricated image of a young woman who judges people only on the basis of their outward look and facial features. Similarly, in the subsequent story within the same chapter, "An Ass Without Ears and Heart," when King Lion commands his minister Jackal to procure an ass for him, Jackal manipulates a distressed ass by tempting him with female asses in the jungle, reducing the female asses to mere objects of

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sexual allure. These stories that solely emphasize on women's beauty based on external appearances are detrimental to child's development. In her seminal work, *The Second Sex* (1949), de Beauvoir discusses how women have historically been objectified and defined by their physical attributes. She famously wrote, "one is not born, but rather, becomes a woman." These narratives, socio-cultural ideology, politics, and numerous exigencies of the time cumulatively construct the very idea of a woman. In this case, *Panchatantra*, the classic creates regressive images, definitions, and perceptions of both woman and womanhood. Nodelman in *The Hidden Adult* (2008), argues that children's literature is fundamentally structured by adult (Male) about what children shall learn and internalize. These time-old children tales create a false discourse on women and forge an alternative representation of them. Through what may be termed as "ideological insulation", patriarchal notions of femininity are subtly normalized, encouraging child readers to associate feminine with only beauty, bodily attractiveness, rather than intelligence, and autonomy.

Through a feminist lens, it's evident that stories intended for moral education are not neutral, they rather function as powerful tools of socialization, reflecting subtle messages about values, behaviour and hierarchy. They primarily affect a child's developing worldview not only regarding society but gender itself. Recognizing these biases is crucial for teachers, parents, educators and scholars alike and demands the inclusion of rewriting of texts that represent women as autonomous and respectable beings. Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of re-examining canonical children's literature and advocates for a literary practice that not only saves culture and heritage but also promotes gender equality.

Sanctifying m(others) and naïve daughters

The only supportive depiction of women in *Panchatantra* is that of motherhood. In one of the narratives, female birds are depicted as nurturing mothers, displaying care for the well-being of their offspring, which represents a rare instance of positive portrayal. A discernible pattern arises from these animal tales: where the mother assumes the sole positive role for a female character, while other females, including wives, who do not fulfil maternal roles, consistently either serve as objects of sexual desire or engage in malevolent actions that pose a threat. Such representations align with de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) which identifies the patriarchal reduction of women to biological and domestic functions, wherein female value is measured primarily through reproduction and caregiving and motherhood becomes an ideological containment.

In a story titled "The Girl Who Married a Snake" (p.177) a similar scenario of "motherhood" unfolds. The frame story introduces us to the compassionate and discerning wife of a Brahmin, who embodies the stereotype of a patriarchal husband. Upon learning of her pregnancy, her husband expresses, "You have fulfilled your duty. You will bear a son who will carry on my lineage." However, the wife responds, "Who can say whether it will indeed be a son?" One of the dominant beliefs in Indian society depicted in *Panchatantra* is that woman's primary role is that of a mother. Bearing a child, especially a boy, confers respect and a higher status than that held by childless women. (Kabaji, 2005). Girl child is socialized to believe that marrying and having children is the only path to womanhood. The wife in the story is just a means, through which the male (Brahmin) would assert his agency biologically. The wife never appears as an independent actor in the story, she is a part of Brahmin's fantasy as a future possession acquired alongside wealth, and property. The wife's character aligns with Woolf's critiques as the "Angel in the House" ideology.

Additionally, "The Brahmin's Wife and the Mongoose," another tale, illustrates the impulsive and impatient nature of a woman as an over caring and overprotective mother. The

story illustrates how a mother, driven by emotions and impatience, mistakenly kills her pet mongoose, believing it to have harmed her baby, when in fact it had saved it from a snake. These examples illustrate how women are often portrayed as humble, nurturing, and kind as mothers superficially but upon closer examination it carries a stereotype of being unintelligent or simply dumb.

In nearly all titles of *Panchatantra*, women are identified solely by their marital status, or relationship to men, such as “The Weaver’s Wife,” “The Farmer’s Wife” and “The Carpenter’s Wife.” These titles highlight the absence of individual identity for women beyond their roles as wives, thereby otherizing them in Edward Said’s terminology. Such women rely on men to define their identity (self) and the false identity created stems from a male-centric authorship and societal framework. The narrative subtly and consciously conditions child readers to accept male authority, female passivity, domesticity, and even violence against women. In a tale titled “The Brahman’s Dream” (p.454), brahman is witnessed creating far-fetched fantasies about his life where his fantasy culminates not in affection or companionship, but in violence. Upon imagining his rich future, he imagines his wife being occupied with household chores and failing to obey his command immediately, to which he decides consciously to react aggressively and says, “Then I will get up and kick her.” Here, the violence against the wife is simply normalized as a legitimate assertion of male authority and dominance.

In one of the stories, “The Girl who Married a Snake,” (p.177) a daughter is depicted as a passive and voiceless woman. She is married off to a snake without her knowledge or consent. The father of the snake expresses to the girl’s father, “I am seeking a suitable and fit wife for my son,” (Ryder, 177) revealing bias as he overlooks the fact that his “son,” is literally a “snake.” Despite of this, he emphasized on finding a physically suitable wife for his son. The daughter is shown absolutely devoted to her husband and lacking her own say or ideology. The power dynamics between the father and daughter, husband and wife highlight broader social structures where men hold power and control over women. Spivak, in her work *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (2010) examines how marginalized groups, including women, are silenced, and excluded from dominant discourses. *Panchatantra* tales have created a discourse of moral values since ages but such fabricated images of women either alter women’s voice in the discourse or omits it altogether.

The representation of women in children’s literature, particularly in tales like those found in the *Panchatantra*, is a subject of ongoing debate and scrutiny. These stories meant for young readers, play a crucial role in shaping perceptions and understanding of societal norms and gender roles. The pervasive presence of misogynistic themes and negative portrayal of women in these tales raise concerns about the potential impact on children’s perspectives and attitudes towards gender.

These tales reflect traditional patriarchal norms and stereotypes prevalent in ancient Indian society. Women are often depicted as subordinate to men, with limited agency and voice. They are reduced to mere objects of desire, subjected to derogatory remarks, and confined to narrow roles such as wives and mothers. The stories consistently reinforce gender inequalities and biases, perpetuating harmful stereotypes that undermine the dignity and autonomy of women. Such tales prove detrimental for child’s cognitive development because they create a similar image of women in their minds. The analysis reveals a pattern of sexist themes, including the portrayal of women as dominating and greedy figures. These remarks normalize stereotypes about women’s inherent flaws and deceitful motives, and a constant emphasis on appearance-centric depictions that reduce women to objects of male desire and ‘male gaze.’ Mulvey’s concept of the “male gaze” (1975) can be easily related here which generally dealt with portrayal of women in visual media from a heterosexual male perspective,

where women are subjected to objectification. For instance, in numerous stories discussed above, female characters are presented as beautiful, seductive, or cunning and are depicted as passive recipients of male attention and manipulation.

Conclusion

The analysis of gender representation in *Panchatantra* stories for young readers reveals a deeply entrenched fabric of misogyny and patriarchy. While these tales have been historically celebrated as repositories of morality and wisdom, this study demonstrates that they simultaneously perpetuate regressive constructions of femininity that shape children who might develop a preconceived notion of gender and anti-woman narratives. These tales, often revered in the name of moral values, propagate prejudicial stereotypes about women and shape a false perception in young readers' minds. Through the lens of gender studies, the paper tried to uncover the underlying patriarchal ideologies and highlighted at the power dynamics. For generations, children's stories have imparted moral lessons, but unfortunately, many of these tales continue to portray women unfairly. These tales make them seem inferior by casting them in a negative way, contributing to their subjugation. Throughout history, women have been oppressed but these tales of children's literature doubly oppress women and fabricate their image altogether.

Through the lens of gender studies, these narratives were analysed to unveil the underlying patriarchal ideologies and power dynamics at play. Feminist theorists such as Judith Butler (1990), bell hooks (1981), Spivak (2010), Laura Mulvey (1975) and Simone de Beauvoir (1949) have critiqued the ways in which gender is constructed and reinforced through such cultural narratives. However, a particularly dominant methodological framework used throughout this study has been the application of Nodelman's "Hidden Adult" and "ideological insulation" from *The Hidden Adult* (2008). Applying this framework to the *Panchatantra*, reveals that these stories function not merely as entertainment or pedagogy but as ideological instruments that normalize patriarchal hierarchies and anaesthetize female subjectivity. As a result, young readers internalize gendered power structures unconsciously and this hidden adult ideology participates in the cultural production patriarchal social structures across generations. Such tales must be reworked and old canon must be broken. This kind of re-working of fairy tales is done by a feminist writer, Suniti Namjoshi in her fable collections, *Feminist Fables* (1981). Her work challenges traditional gender roles and deals with such aspects from women's lives that have been erased, twisted, fabricated, demeaned, and mystified. Her fables interrogate marginalization of women's voices in the patriarchal discourse and inspire women to voice for self-identity and autonomy in society.

As we conclude, it is imperative to recognize the detrimental impact of these fabricated images of women on young minds. By acknowledging and addressing the biases embedded within these narratives, we can pave a way for a more inclusive and equitable society. Through initiatives like the feminist fables of Suniti Namjoshi (1981) which interrogate and subvert traditional gender roles, we can re-shape the false depiction of women and portray them in real and positive light. Further research may explore feminist retellings, adaptations, animated re-interpretations, and digital re-mediations of canonical texts like *Panchatantra*. More research must be carried out in the intersection of the domains of children's literature, gender studies and feminism where new children's tales will restore the lost respect of women by providing them with dignity, autonomy, and respect. These new works must interrogate and subvert traditional gender roles and must inspire change and foster a new generation of readers by challenging these harmful stereotypes rather than perpetuating them. What children's literature needs is not a "hidden adult" that silently hides realities, fogs young minds, remains phallogocentric or androcentric or take sides of power. Instead, it must become a transformative

literary consciousness that allows marginalized voices to define themselves beyond patriarchal imagination. As Morrison writes in *Beloved*, “Definitions belong to the definers, not the defined”. For centuries, canonical tales have allowed patriarchal voices but now we need tales that reclaim, rewrite, and reshape the age-old biases by transforming “monstrous wives, naïve daughters” to “indomitable women and perspicacious daughters”.

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Bio-note

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