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Illustration: Pariplab Chakraborty.

Stories for children come in different genres – fairy tales, folktales, adventure and ghost stories, historical and science fiction, detective stories – you name it. Be it in the context of home or school, stories have the power to transport children into an imaginary world filled with magic, fun and excitement.

They not only enhance imagination and creativity among children but also enhance their attention span besides being a powerful medium to instill certain values. But do stories have the potential to develop in young minds critical thinking skills, the buzzword in the world of education today (though often used rather loosely), and therefore be used as a pedagogical approach in classrooms? And if so what kind of stories are most appropriate for that?

Popular fairy tales out of sync with today's generation

Research in children's literature shows that many of the popular fairy tales and folktales are often too moralistic and therefore out of sync with today's generation. Many of such stories have also been criticised for being misogynistic and reinforcing stereotypes regarding gender roles. In popular European fairy tales like Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty and Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, almost all the female characters are visualised as being slender, having silky hair and porcelain white complexion.

They are also 'damsels in distress' – passive with little or no agency – who need to be rescued from their suffering by a brave, heroic and handsome prince. The stories typically end with these young women falling in love with their rescuer, tying the nuptial knot and living happily thereafter. It is little surprising therefore that these stories are often questioned for propagating rather restrictive and unrealistic standards of beauty and their exclusion of racially diverse characters.

With their promotion of heterosexual relationships and marriage as the goal they have also been called out for being homophobic, constructing a problematic notion of femininity and masculinity and devaluing the significance of educational or professional success in life for women- ideas which are regressive in the present context.

The Indian version of such tales is no better. The *roopkathas* in Bengali, for instance the hugely popular 'Thakurmar Jhuli' (Grandmother's Bag of Tales) written by Dakshinarajan Mitra Majumdar or the equally loved 'Khirer Putul' penned by Abanindranath Tagore have a typical storyline – a king having more than one queen, one of the queens doesn't have children and conceive through divine intervention, gives birth to an animal(for example, a monkey); gets banished from the royal palace and lives in penury, monkey prince grows up, saves king from trouble; reunites parents, transforms into a handsome prince, marries a princess and they all live happily ever after.

Though they continue to be popular, they have often been held responsible for upholding polygamy, legitimising preference for the male child and reinforcing stereotypical gender roles.

The moot question is: Should we continue to introduce such stories to children, or should we completely shun them? While many parents and educators have consciously decided to forgo this genre, research suggests otherwise.

According to Donald P. Haase, author of *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches* (2004), parents need not shy away from fairy tales. Instead, they should introduce children to such stories cautiously and engage them in a meaningful conversation thereby encouraging them to question and critique the stereotypes and archaisms. He argues that they (parents) "can read or tell classical tales in ways that intentionally question or subvert the stereotypes".

These stories can also be used by educators in the classroom. In fact, if used thoughtfully storytelling can become part of an innovative pedagogical approach, what the renowned Brazilian educationist Paulo Freire referred to as the 'problem posing model of education'.

Opposed to the conventional 'banking model of education' (where the teacher as the all-knowing individual simply deposits information in the heads of children whom she assumes to be like empty vessels), Freire proposed that children ought to be presented with real-life problem situations which they should be encouraged to solve.

This would not only prevent them from mindlessly and passively memorising information but would encourage them to engage with the learning process meaningfully and actively participate in the process of knowledge construction.

By engaging children in a dialogue, teachers should be able to make them systematically analyse and critique all forms of inequality, domination, and oppression based on gender, class, race and ethnicity among others. In the process children would develop a critical social consciousness.

Stories that question gender norms

Further Freire argued that critiquing an oppressive system or ideology is not enough. It is equally important to develop a counterculture whereby oppositional values, ideas and practices can be promoted to challenge the hegemony of dominant cultural practices and norms, what Freire terms as counter-hegemony.

Fortunately, a wide range of storybooks are available today which question social stereotypes, promote alternative values and viewpoints and thus have the potential to promote critical thinking and literacy skills among children. One such example is the 'Paper Bag Princess' authored by the well-known Canadian writer, Robert Munsch.

It is a delightful tale of a feisty young princess, Elizabeth who when confronted with a difficult situation (where a fire-breathing dragon kidnaps her fiancé, Prince Ronald, destroys her castle, and burns down everything), wears a paper bag (the only thing she could find to cover herself) and sets off to rescue him. On finding the dragon inside his castle where Ronald was held captive, Elizabeth tricks the dragon through sheer wit and intelligence and finally rescues her fiancé.

But when Ronald, instead of being grateful, mocks Elizabeth for wearing a paper bag and instructs her to have a bath and wear something befitting a royalty, she decides to break off her relationship. She says – "Ronald you look like a real prince but you are a bum!" The story ends with Elizabeth happily setting off into the sunset alone.

The story which is available online provides a series of very thought-provoking questions, which can be used by teachers to start a conversation with children. The following are a few examples –

- How does Elizabeth look and act differently from other princesses/characters that you are familiar with? Is this unusual? Why?
- In what ways is Ronald different from other princes? In what ways is he similar?
- Do you think Elizabeth should have behaved differently in the end?
- Is it natural that princes always do certain things and princesses do certain different things? Or are the roles there only because society expects them to behave like that?

'The Weightlifting Princess' written by Soumya Rajendran and published by Pratham, our home-grown popular children's publishing house is another book worth mentioning here. It narrates the story of Neela, a princess who aspires to become a weightlifting champion and travel to a far-off place to attend the best sports school in her kingdom.

Unlike a typical princess, Neela is shown as dark-complexioned, who eats well and trains hard to gain weight to become eligible to participate in the Surya Championship, the famous sports event in her kingdom. Neela overcomes all the hurdles, defeats the reigning champion, a prince named Vikram (to whom her father had planned to marry her). When her father congratulates Neela saying "Now you are worthy of being a champion's wife" she smiles and confidently declares "Now I am the champion!"

Written within the genre of fantasy and beautifully illustrated, both the stories can be understood easily and enjoyed by children. Having been critically acclaimed for reversing the prevalent archetypes of prince and princesses they not only offer immense possibilities of engaging children in a meaningful dialogue around questioning stereotypical gender roles but also provide alternative imaginations of the same in a humorous yet powerful manner.

Accompanied by relevant questions they can indeed become part of an effective pedagogical approach to enable children to view the world around them through a critical lens.

Tales that challenge social hierarchy

Stories can also be used to enable children to become aware of the inequalities that exist in the society based on deeply entrenched social structures like the caste system that have led to the marginalization of certain social groups. Two such books worth mentioning in this context are 'Bhimayana', a Navayana publication and 'The Why, Why Girl' published by Tulika.

Written by Srividya Natarajan and S.Anand, Bhimayana is based on the autobiographical notes penned by Bhimrao Ramoji Ambedkar titled 'Waiting for Visa' and narrates the experiences of caste discrimination and humiliation experienced by him at different points in his life and also his relentless struggle against it.

The book has been critically acclaimed for weaving historical events with contemporary issues as well as for the brilliant illustrations created by reputed Pardhan-Gond artists Durgabai Vyam and Subhas Vyam, which add depth to the written narrative.

The Why Why Girl is a delightful picture book authored by Mahasweta Devi, the renowned Jnanapith award winner and social activist who is known for her work among the Adivasis. The story narrates the author's encounter with Moyna, a young girl from a poor, landless Adivasi family in rural West Bengal.

Poverty and her difficult life situation however fail to stop Moyna from being curious about the world around her and asking questions. She is a feisty young person who doesn't even hesitate to question the undue privileges enjoyed by the 'babu', a wealthy landowner in whose house she and mother work. When the author meets Moyna she finally convinces her to study so that she can find the answers to all her questions in books. Moyna gets convinced, enrolls herself in the local school, graduates and later becomes a schoolteacher herself.

If introduced thoughtfully both books have the immense potential to make children aware of the existing inequalities in our society and engage them in meaningful deliberation around the critical need for social justice. Accompanied by beautiful illustrations, the books can attract children easily.

Once they become engrossed in the story, the teacher can gradually pose a few relevant thought-provoking questions and draw the students into a conversation.

Teacher as the facilitator

However, it is not enough to have books which critique archaisms or social hierarchies. It is equally crucial to have educators who are sensitive to such issues and have the intent and will to delve into them seriously and creatively.

For this it is critical that they transform themselves from the all-knowing teacher (who expects children to passively receive the knowledge handed down by her and reproduce the same verbatim) to a facilitator – someone who creates a democratic and safe space within the classroom where children can engage in meaningful dialogues with the teacher, learn collaboratively by sharing multiple and diverse perspectives without the fear of being judged and critically reflect on issues of inequality, oppression and injustice.

In the process they can develop critical consciousness and co-construct knowledge with the help of the teacher.

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