



# Perpetuating Gender Bias in Children's Cartoons: Portrayal of Female Characters in *Shin Chan* and *Doraemon*

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**Abstract**— This paper will study the portrayal of female characters in cartoons with special reference to *Shin Chan* and *Doraemon*. Through a feminist critique, the paper would discuss how gender bias is perpetuated through the gender roles assigned to the characters in these shows. Gender discrimination is perpetuated by such external factors and consolidated by the children's communication with their friends and classmates. This paper endeavours to examine how different stereotypes of gender are pushed through the veil of "child entertainment" via the cartoons and how these issues can be addressed.

**Keywords**— Gender discrimination, portrayal of female characters, *Shin Chan*, *Doraemon*.

Gender discrimination or inequality can be seen in various spheres - from personal to professional. The concepts of gender and sexuality are instilled right from childhood. A child understands the idea of gender and sexuality at about two years of age. "Although they have not constructed a consistent view of their own gender, they can distinguish females and males and learn to divide the world between women and men. They define behaviours of woman and man (stereotypes about sexuality)." (Barner 190)

While cartoons and animated movies are considered innocent or "clean" mediums for our children, it is important, especially for the parents to not miss the subtle manner in which they shape the minds and personalities of the young viewers. Even before they go to school they are surrounded by influences that shape the way they perceive the world as well as themselves. While several gender sensitive cartoons are being made today, there is a huge need to address the issue of gender inequality in this area.

This paper will study the portrayal of female characters in cartoons with special reference to *Shin Chan*

and *Doraemon*. Through a feminist critique, the paper would discuss how gender bias is perpetuated through the gender roles assigned to the characters in these shows. Gender discrimination is perpetuated by such external factors and consolidated by the children's communication with their friends and classmates. This paper endeavours to examine how different stereotypes of gender are pushed through the veil of "child entertainment" via the cartoons and how these issues can be addressed.

Research demonstrates that television affects youngsters in regards to their mentalities towards gender and gender roles. The stereotypical representation of the gender roles shown on television can be seen being reinforced by parents at home, friends in playgrounds, peers and classmates in school and even teachers. This reinforcement of what is shown in the cartoons contributes to the child's understanding of gender roles in the society in general. A child learns the concept of female and male in society. Television, through the cartoons, sends powerful and convincing messages about socially endorsed gender roles, which are frequently generalized, one-sided, and obsolete. As children grow up, their exposure to these gendered constructs and labels continues to increase.

*Shin Chan* and *Doraemon* are Japanese cartoon series which are exceedingly popular among the children across the world. Both the cartoons are a part of the Japanese 'manga' and anime series. The term 'manga' is used in Japanese to refer to both cartoons and comics.

Doraemon is a fictional character created by Fujiko Fujio, the nom de plume of the writing team Hiroshi Fujimoto and Motoo Abiko. He is a male automated feline that turns back the clock from the 22nd century to help a juvenile kid named Nobita Nobi. He is sent from the future by Sewashi Nobi, Nobita's great-great-grandson in the future in order to improve Nobita's circumstances so that his descendants may enjoy a good life. Nobita is shown as a failure, gets poor grades in class, is bullied by his classmates and always appeals to Doraemon for help.

Doraemon has a four-dimensional pocket where he stores surprising devices he uses to help Nobita Nobi. Doraemon's contraptions assist Nobita in overcoming the difficulties, and they share a special bond of love and friendship. Nobita's dearest friend and love interest is Shizuka Minamoto. Gian and Suneo frequently menace Nobita, but at the same time are displayed as Nobita's companions in specific scenes, particularly in the films. A commonplace story consists of Nobita taking a device from Doraemon to solve his problems and further aggravating his situation. (Wikipedia)

*Shin Chan* is also a Japanese manga series written and illustrated by Yoshito Usui. "It follows the adventures of the five-year-old Shinnosuke "Shin Chan" Nohara and his parents, baby sister, dog, neighbours, and best friends and is set in Kasukabe, Saitama Prefecture, Japan." (Wikipedia) Both *Doraemon* and *Shin Chan* have been dubbed into several other languages and enjoy immense popularity in Asian countries. In India they are aired on 'Disney Channel' and 'Hungama TV' respectively.

This paper studies gender stereotypes in the above mentioned cartoon series and how the portrayal of female and male characters in children's cartoons impacts the psyche of young viewers and perpetuates gender bias. "Children often internalize gender role stereotypes from books, songs, television, and the movies." (Thorne 85) "Television, however, is perhaps the most influential form of media." (Lauer & Lauer 115) Research on television viewing and children's socialization indicates that television has a great impact on children's lives. Intons-Peterson is of the opinion that "children accumulate knowledge about gender and sex by observing models' behaviors and reinforcement patterns." (250)

In order to understand this we first need to define 'gender'. The American Psychological Association defines

gender as "the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that a given culture associates with a person's biological sex." Due to the recent shifts in gender studies, the World Health Organization offers a definition of gender that is not necessarily linked to a particular person's biological sex (which may or may not be the sex they identify with), but rather defines it as the "socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women." This definition accepts people who relate to and remotely seem, by all accounts, to be an individual from a sex that varies from their biological sexual features. "Gender is categorized as masculine, feminine and androgynous (or having features of both sexes)." (Brewer 25)

Sex and gender are the recurring aspects that contribute in imbalanced statuses of men and women in the society. Generally, sex denotes the natural and biological differences between men and women whereas gender is referred to the acquired social, cultural, traditional and psychological behavior towards men and women.

In *Shin Chan*, the character is a mischievous five year old boy who is way too smart for his age. He resorts to tricks and plays pranks on others all the time. He has a sense of humour and his jokes are clumsy and sometimes below the belt. At times he is presented as highly annoying yet adorable. His mother, Mitzy, is cast in a highly stereotypical role. She is a housewife who is always doing household chores and raising her two children. The father, Harry, is shown as going to office and is never shown participating in the routine housework.

Putting female and male character in slots that define the type of roles that society expects them to play is directly limiting the countless possible options that a child would otherwise be free to explore. (Erick 168)

The scenes showing the whole family together are usually the mealtimes where the father is always distraught at the noisy children. He seems to be drained out and tired after the day's work. Bedtime scenes involve everyone sleeping peacefully and if ever the children create any trouble the father moves out to sleep in a different room in order to get his sleep as he needs to go to the office the next day. Here, the fact that Mitzy has to do much manual work too the next day, is completely negated. She has to cook, clean, handle the children and send the older one to school among other things. This viewpoint is simply due to the fact that she is engaged in a work which is considered "non-productive" while her husband's job is considered to be "productive". He is the provider and the bread-winner of the family. Hence, it is the father who he is the head of

the family and not the mother. All the decisions are taken only after consulting him.

“The symbolic annihilation of the female gender in kids’ television programming sends out the message that their stories do not matter.” (Merskin 59) Mitzy comes across as a frustrated, hyper and disheveled character who struggles to get basic tasks done. Shin Chan, being a mischievous child and often exasperating, hinders his mother in her daily chores to a large extent. What is to be noted here is that Shin Chan and Mitzy are both active and full of energy. On the other hand, Harry looks lethargic and drained out of energy. We can easily make out that Shin Chan shares a lot of qualities with his mother. “Female and male genders are presented differently in cartoon programmes, female characters are shown doing household works, and they are inferior and not strong as male characters.” (Magotra 3)

The argument here is not that taking care of home, family or children is less dignified but the argument here is about reducing women to just these roles while considering them unsuitable for roles which require intellect, higher thinking or putting them in roles where they are in a position to run their homes. Limiting them to a particular chore conforming to the social construct becomes detrimental when the audiences of the show are young impressionable minds. All the other mothers are shown in a similar manner in this series. Mitzy’s sister is portrayed as a lazy and dreamy girl who wants to have a career as a photographer but is mostly dependent on her sister for several things.

Contrary to all this, Harry is seen as ogling at beautiful women and flirting with them on occasion. This trait filters down to Shin Chan who is portrayed as doing the same – he ogles at young women and also flirts with his teachers. The cartoon series projects this aspect of men as universal and normal, even desirable. None of the women flirts with other men or ogles at them. If we take into account other cartoon series and characters, we never see any female protagonists as flirtatious or engaging in such behavior around the males.

Conventional gender roles, where men are expected to take vital decisions and are the head of the family while women are expected to be deferential and dependent upon the male members, are detrimental to everyone, particularly women. Conventional gender roles are a strong discouragement for the full realization of a child’s true potential and accomplishment. Children should be provided a gender-fair environment in order to encourage their wholesome development and also help them develop a sense of self.

The female protagonist of *Doraemon*, Shizuka is an earnest girl who usually tops her class. She is displayed as a splendid and persevering young lady, who can obviously have a brilliant future. Notwithstanding, in one of the episodes, when she is asked about her ambition in life, she answers that she aims to be a decent and good wife one day. This kind of attitude and conditioning may be attributed to the lack of working and independent female role-models in her life, most importantly her mother. Most children learn gender specific roles from seeing their parents in their everyday life. Perpetuating that on the television does the job of solidifying their innocent notions.

In *Doraemon*, Nobita is a crybaby who can never get any of his works done on his own. Doraemon helps him in almost everything from completing his homework to dealing with bullies in school as well as in the playground. Yet, Shizuka is portrayed as being charmed and fascinated by him. While Shizuka is the brightest student in the school, yet it is Nobita who goes to office and she takes care of the family at home when they are shown as husband and wife in the future. Shizuka is an epitome of the stereotypes of females. She is beautiful, sweet, hardworking and polite. Of all the children in the show it is always Shizuka who bakes goodies for the rest of her friends.

Children have different ways to conceptualize gender where depending on their stage of development, viewing gendered content can be assumed to affect children’s personal gender schemas. (O’Byrant & Corder Bolz 244)

There are numerous examples of gender stereotyping and objectification of women in “Doraemon”. Although Nobita is a young lad studying in class five, yet his behavior does not conform to his age. His actions defy his young age and he is presented as a pervert and flirt. There are several incidents where he is seen pulling Shizuka’s skirt, watching her bathe secretly and also fitting cameras in her room. All this content when viewed by young children has a grossly negative impact on their impressionable minds. Showing such content is equivalent to vindicating such behavior thereby normalizing it.

When children watch such cartoons, they internalize everything that they see and believe that to be true. They follow this in their life which affects their psychological and mental development. The portrayal of women as second rate is not only highly offensive but this objectification of women sends a wrong message to the young viewers. “This conclusion is dangerous as now boys may wrongly develop an inflated sense of importance

while girls start to feel like second-class citizens.” (Fitzpatrick & McPherson 130)

According to Barner:

...males engaged in a wider range of behaviours in educational television programs than females. The kinds of behaviours expressed by male and female television characters often reflected gender stereotypes. Specifically, male characters were depicted as more active, constructive, dominant, aggressive and attention seeking whereas female characters were depicted as more deferent, dependent and nurturing. (Barner 557)

This paper argues that the more the children are exposed to stereotypical materials, the more chances there are that they will learn and adopt the social practices about the gender behaviours from the animated cartoons on television, which they watch during most of the day. Subsequently, within the sight of authoritative control of state's man centric belief system and through cliché depiction, the young boys are prepared to figure out how to be more dynamic, astute and forceful while the little girls are urged to become pretty and submissive. Therefore, because of the present principles about gender and sex which are dispersed through cartoon shows, it is highly probable that during the process of socialization, these sorts of biased and prejudiced portrayals of the female characters could bring about the feeling of inadequacy among the girls and that of predominance amongst the boys. Children without television have been shown to be less stereotyped in their gender role attitudes (Kimball 272). Furthermore, children who view programs with non-traditional gender roles tend to have non-traditional gender role perceptions. (Rosenwasser, Lingenfelter, & Harrington 100) Because children model the behavior they see on television, they are likely to perpetuate gender stereotypes they view. (Strasburger 164)

Industrially produced fiction has become one of the primary shapers of our emotions and our intellect in the twentieth century. Although these stories are supposed to merely entertain us, they constantly give us a secret education. We are not only taught certain styles of violence, the latest fashions, and sex roles by TV, movies, magazines, and comic strips; we are also taught how to succeed, how to love, how to buy, how to conquer, how to forget the past and suppress the future. We are taught more than anything else, how not to rebel. There has also been a tendency

to avoid scrutinizing these mass media products too closely, to avoid asking the sort of hard questions that can yield disquieting answers. It is not strange that this should be so. The industry itself has declared time and again with great forcefulness that it is innocent, that no hidden motives or implications are lurking behind the cheerful faces it generates. (Dorfman 9)

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