

Creating Gender Awareness in Higher Secondary Classrooms: A Pedagogical Study of Any Woman and The Matchbox

Anithamol K Joseph
Guest Teacher in English, St. Augustine HSS Karimkunnam, Kerala
Department of English
Kottayam
India

Abstract: Gender awareness is a crucial component of modern education, aiming to cultivate equality, sensitivity, and critical thinking among students. Literature, mirroring societal truths, is crucial in influencing students' views on gender roles and relationships. This paper examines the pedagogical potential of Ashapurna Devi's *The Matchbox* and Katherine Tynan's *Any Woman* in promoting gender awareness in higher secondary classrooms is examined in this essay. The study investigates how these works represent women's experiences of marginalization, constraint, and invisibility within patriarchal frameworks using a combined textual and pedagogical approach. It further highlights how classroom engagement with these texts, through discussion and reflection, can encourage students to question stereotypes and develop empathy towards gender issues. The paper emphasizes the role of the teacher in facilitating meaningful interpretation and dialogue, thereby transforming literature classrooms into spaces of social awareness. Without relying on experimental data, the study argues that thoughtful teaching practices can significantly influence students' understanding of gender equality and contribute to the development of a more inclusive and reflective mindset.

IndexTerms - Gender role, Women's identity, Gender inequality, Comparative analysis

INTRODUCTION

Education plays a vital role in developing not only the intellectual abilities of students but also their values, attitudes, and social consciousness. In today's world, where problems of inequality and discrimination remain prevalent, promoting gender awareness has emerged as a critical goal of education. Educational institutions, especially at the higher secondary level, are key environments where young individuals can be encouraged to cultivate an understanding of gender roles and dynamics. As Simone de Beauvoir states, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," emphasizes how society constructs gender roles and expectations. Such ideas are important in classrooms, where students begin to question and understand social norms.

In our classrooms, gender stereotypes are often unconsciously reinforced by teachers themselves. Teachers may describe boys as confident, smart and hard and girls as soft, caring and nurturing, thereby creating a wrong image in the students about gender. Although such comments may seem harmless, but they can influence students' inner self.

Literature, as a reflection of lived experiences, offers a powerful medium to engage students with social realities. Through characters, narratives, and poetic expressions, literary texts enable learners to understand complex issues such as identity, power, and marginalization. When taught effectively, literature can move beyond aesthetic appreciation and function as a tool for critical inquiry and social awareness.

The poem *Any Woman* by Katherine Tynan depicts the importance of women in the family. The speaker compares herself to different parts of the house, such as the pillar and the fire, to show that she is everything that holds the family together. Even though she does many things for the family, her work is often not noticed or valued. The poem highlights how women's efforts are taken for granted and how they sacrifice their own identity for the sake of the family. It helps students understand the importance of respecting women's roles.

The Matchbox by Ashapurna Devi shows how women face restrictions in a male-dominated society. The matchbox in the story is a symbol of control and limitation. The story presents how a woman in a patriarchal family is deprived of her freedom and is forced to follow the decisions of others. It clearly shows the lack of independence and the dominance of male authority. This text helps students think about gender inequality and understand the need for freedom and equality for women.

This paper attempts to explore how these texts can be effectively used in higher secondary classrooms to create gender awareness among students. By focusing on pedagogical approaches that encourage discussion, reflection, and critical engagement, the study highlights the potential of literature teaching in promoting sensitivity, empathy, and a more equitable perspective among learners.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY.

- To analyse the representation of women's roles and experiences in *Any Woman* and *The Matchbox*.
- To examine how these texts reflect gender inequality in society.
- To explore how teaching these texts can create gender awareness among higher secondary students.
- To highlight the role of literature in promoting critical thinking and social sensitivity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since classrooms have an impact on students' attitudes people have started to focus more on being aware of gender issues in schools in recent years. Research shows that the materials we use to learn how teachers interact with students and the ways teachers teach can all have biases towards one gender. Frederick F. Abrahams and Ingrid N. Sommerkorn in their study say that schools where boys and girls learn together may unintentionally reinforce mal-oriented perspectives, this can negatively affect female students' confidence and participation. The study emphasizes that we need teaching methods that take into account the needs of boys and girls so that girls can have equal opportunities to grow and develop.

Additional studies examine how teachers contribute to establishing gender-responsive classrooms. Ernesto L. Bastida Jr. and his co-researchers examine how teachers' understanding and pedagogical practices influence gender equality in classrooms. Their study identifies challenges such as limited awareness, lack of proper training, and the persistence of traditional gender roles (Bastida et al.). It stresses the importance of adopting inclusive teaching strategies that encourage equal participation and create a supportive learning environment student.

The study by Marissa Generale and Cubing Emilyn looks at what students think about gender awareness in the classroom. They found that students have a good idea of what is going on with gender issues but they are not really sure if there is discrimination because of gender. This study also talks about some things, like how boys and girls behave differently, how teachers' pay attention to them and how important it is that they get to learn the same things. These things found out show that students know a bit about gender awareness but schools need to do more to make sure boys and girls are treated equally.

These studies show us that education is really important for looking at and questioning the way society thinks about men and women. They tell us that teachers can make a difference by trying hard and using the right materials to teach students. This means that stories about women's lives and struggles can be very helpful in the classroom to help older students understand and care about others be fair and know what is going on in the world. Education and teaching are key, to making this happen. The right education can help students think carefully about issues. Literary texts that show what women go through can be powerful tools for teachers to use with higher secondary students.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative and analytical method to investigate the role of gender awareness in literary texts. The poem "Any Woman" by Katherine Tynan and the short story "The Matchbox" by Ashapura Devi are primary sources for the study. These texts are examined order to comprehend how women's roles, experiences, and difficulties are portrayed in both family and societal contexts. Secondary sources, including scholarly works and research articles about gender awareness and classroom practices, are also used in this study. Key themes like gender inequality, lack of freedom, and women's invisible labor are identified using a thematic analysis method. This methodology's goal is to investigate how these literary works can be used in higher secondary classrooms to encourage students' social sensitivity, critical thinking, and gender awareness.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The poem Any Woman by Katherine Tynan presents a powerful portrayal of the role of women within the family structure. The speaker identifies herself as the very foundation of the household, declaring, "I am the pillars of the house; The keystone of the arch am I" (Tynan). Through this metaphor, the poet emphasizes that the entire stability and unity of the family depend upon the woman. The imagery of architectural strength suggests that without her presence, the family structure would collapse. This highlights not only her importance but also the heavy responsibility placed upon women, which often goes unrecognized.

Further in the poem, the speaker describes herself as a source of warmth, care, and emotional support: "I am the fire upon the hearth, / I am the light of the good sun." These lines symbolize the nurturing role of women, who provide both physical and emotional sustenance to the family. The woman becomes the centre of love and protection, ensuring the well-being of her children. The lines "At me the children warm their hands; / I am their light of love alive" reinforce the idea that the mother is the emotional core of the household. However, despite fulfilling these essential roles, her identity remains confined within the domestic sphere, pointing to the lack of recognition and independence granted to women.

The concluding lines of the poem, "I am their wall against all danger, / Their door against the wind and snow, / Take me not till the children grow," further emphasize the protective and self-sacrificing nature of women. The speaker's plea reflects her complete dedication to her family, often at the cost of her own freedom and individuality. This portrayal reveals how women's lives are deeply tied to their familial roles, leaving little space for personal growth or autonomy. Thus, the poem brings out the theme of invisible labour and the emotional burden carried by women in a patriarchal society. While "Any Woman" portrays women as the solid base of the family, "The Matchbox" exposes the painful reality.

In "The Matchbox," the author illustrates how women are controlled and silenced within a patriarchal family, as seen through the character of Nomita. Ajit's tendency to open and occasionally conceal Nomita's letters indicates a lack of respect for her privacy and autonomy. When he says, "What if I opened it? My own wife's letter," it shows that he believes he has the right to control her life. Nomita feels hurt and insulted, but Ajit's behaviour remains unchanged despite her anger. At one point, her frustration reaches such a peak that she attempts to burn her sari, revealing how profoundly upset and powerless she feels. Nevertheless, even this action fails to bring about genuine change. The central theme of the story is conveyed via the matchbox metaphor. The narrator claims that women "have the materials within themselves to set off many raging fires," yet they still "never flare up and burn away the mask of men's high-mindedness." This indicates that women possess inner strength and power, yet they are often taught to suppress their anger and stay silent. Overall, the story highlights the struggles of women in a male-dominated family and shows how their strength is often suppressed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, "Any Woman" and "The Matchbox" both highlight the crucial role that women play in the home while also highlighting the fact that they are often not respected or given freedom. The speaker in "Any Woman" takes pride in being the family's pillar of support and guardian. However, Nomita's life in "The Matchbox" illustrates how, despite their inner strength,

women are oppressed and treated unfairly. In a culture where men predominate, women's identity and independence are frequently restricted, as both works demonstrate. These pieces serve as a reminder that women should be respected and acknowledged.

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