

“No one ever asks children what they want”: Power in the School Stories

of Varsha Seshan

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Abstract:

This paper analyses the adult-child power relationship in Varsha Seshan’s school stories *Sisters at New Dawn* (2020) and *Dhara’s Revolution* (2023), focusing on the child’s voice in the classroom, power hierarchies amongst students, and the parent-child equation in the texts. The paper contextualises adult-child power relations in children’s literature through Nodelman’s theories of the ‘hidden adult’ and the ‘double awareness’ of the child. In *Sisters at New Dawn*, power hierarchies among students, gossip and rumours, academic pressure, and bullying continue to be present despite the lack of a traditional teacher-student power equation. In *Dhara’s Revolution*, children are encouraged to come up with revolutionary ideas, but the power to execute them continues to rest with the adults. Through a reading of both texts, the paper argues that access to information can be a form of power for children.

Keywords: Indian children’s literature, school story, power, hidden adult, double awareness.

Introduction

Power is implicated in the very concept of childhood. The child is thought of as the “inferior version” of the adult, one who needs to be “guided, protected, and educated” by adults (Nandy 359). Adult power is also present in the very articulation of children’s literature as a field, which is defined as “writing for young people by adults” and “an adult practice with intentions toward child readers” (Nodelman 3, 4). This urge to shape the child according to adult interests through literature aimed at them is not only considered a facet of children’s literature in general but also “in India specifically”, where “literary historians and children’s authors agree that the literature has always been and remains today primarily didactic” (Superle 20). Recently, however, there has been a rise in books which show more democratic adult-child power relations or books where adults have goodwill towards children’s independence. Menon and Rao’s understanding of the contemporary Indian English children’s publishing scenario suggests that such books are becoming more popular. They write how the “imagination of the consumer” of Indian children’s literature in English has now shifted to a child who “enjoys relatively democratic relationships with adults.” Correspondingly, in high-quality literary publications for children, there is a “push to free children from their place of innocence and safety to a point where they take their place side-by-side with adults” (18). Varsha Seshan’s school stories *Sisters at New Dawn* (2020) and *Dhara’s Revolution* (2023) fall in this category. *Sisters at New Dawn* overtly suggests an alternative to traditional pedagogical models. In *Dhara’s Revolution*, children are encouraged to be “revolutionary” and voice what they want to change.

While reading narratives such as these, which promise more than the usual share of power to children, it is important to ask whether the power that is presented is illusory, or whether the child reader is prompted to recognize its reach and limits. That is, do these narratives encourage the child’s potential to be aware of adult presence and power even within an overtly democratic

framework? As Menon and Rao write, “It is not possible or even desirable to subtract the adult from the equation” – instead, “[t]he effort should be to make the adult hand less ‘hidden’” (23). For Menon and Rao, this work involves considering the contexts and intentions of adult authors (23). This paper, on the other hand, will focus on adult presence within the text and how children navigate power relations within the text. Its central question is this: in books where the child is encouraged to question traditional power hierarchies, what are the limits of such questioning?

In order to address this question, the paper will analyse Varsha Seshan’s *Sisters at New Dawn* (2020) and *Dhara’s Revolution* (2023) with a focus on three aspects: the child’s voice in the classroom, power hierarchies amongst students, and parental presence within the texts. It will contextualise this textual analysis using Nodelman’s theories of the ‘hidden adult’ and ‘double awareness’. In doing so, the paper aims to show how access to information can be a form of power for children.

The Hidden Adult and the Double Awareness of the Child

Within the conception of the child, some aspects are palatable to adults while some are not. Nandy differentiates between the “childlike” and the “childish” – while “childlike” indicates innocence and purity, “childish” indicates stubbornness and a lack of growth. “Childlike” suggests that which must be preserved, and “childish” suggests qualities that must be moulded (Nandy 359-60). This duality of the child is central to children’s literature, which has historically held two aims – to entertain and to teach (Stevenson 180).

Nodelman considers this duality to be the reason for the existence of children’s literature. He argues that the child is simultaneously “controllable” and “uncontrollable” – children’s literature is an attempt towards the former. However, its continued existence as a field of writing is testament to the persistence of that which escapes total control (187). According to

him, it is the adult urge to control – under which Nodelman also includes the adult urge to protect or safeguard – combined with the peskiness of the uncontrollable that keeps children’s literature in production (187). This impulse towards control and protection is a facet of power exercised by adults.

Nodelman coalesces his emphasis on adult presence and power into a conceptualisation of the ‘hidden’ adult in children’s literature. Firstly, he interprets the ‘hidden’ adult in a direct way, pointing out that both the publishers and the purchasers of children’s literature are adults and therefore, children’s literature answers adult conceptions of what a child would or should read (5). Nodelman lists “editors, publishers, reviewers, librarians, and parents” as the “actual audience” of children’s literature (206).

However, it is important to remember that adult presence in children’s publishing does not automatically imply children’s absence from it. Not only are children amongst the consumers and readers of children’s texts, but they are also participants in many negotiations at play. For instance, adults’ ideas about what children are or should be reading may be shaped in part by their conversations with children. Even when adults select books for children, the latter may have myriad responses to them. With an increase in the online presence of authors and publishers, children may also have interactions with them on social media. In addition to this, children may also have networks amongst themselves for recommending, discussing, and sharing books, which can influence their popularity. The relationship between child readers, adult purchasers, adult writers, and publishing houses is complex and multi-layered.

Nodelman’s second interpretation of the ‘hidden’ adult is therefore more significant. Adult authors are conscious about writing for a child audience, visible in the voice, tone, and vocabulary they adopt and the topics or themes they may keep at bay. Nodelman argues that what inevitably arrives as a “shadow” in children’s texts is that which adults try to conceal

(206). Drawing on post-structuralist thought, Nodelman points out that what is childlike is constructed and can be identified only through its opposite, knowledge available to adults. That is, children’s literature contains traces of the author’s effort to leave out that which they consider suitable only for other adults. In this way, he explains that children’s literature “hides but still manages to imply the presence of” adult consciousness (206).

This adult consciousness in children’s literature is not by nature inaccessible to the child. Instead, the child may have a “double awareness” – they may access in the text not only what is intended for them, but also what is hidden from them. Nodelman articulates this as the potential of the child to simultaneously “see[] innocently” and “see[] through innocence” (210). If the dual purpose of children’s literature is to entertain and to teach, the child reader has the potential to know when they are being taught. The potential of “double awareness” is also the potential of the child to understand or be aware of how adult power operates. This paper aims to understand whether the texts under study encourage the child’s potential for ‘double awareness’ when it comes to recognising the ‘hidden’ adult hand.

Sisters at New Dawn

In *Sisters at New Dawn*, Padma and Kannagi enrol as students at New Dawn School, which overtly aims to subvert traditional power hierarchies at school. This effort is partly pedagogical – at New Dawn, subjects like English, Maths, and Hindi are only one part of the curriculum, called RLS or ‘Real Life Skills.’ The curriculum also contains HCAs (High Chance of Application), MCAs (Medium Chance of Application), and LCAs (Low Chance of Application). While HCAs seem to include different art forms such as playing an instrument or working with fabric, MCAs include a variety of skills such as mapping, moulding, clay modelling, and history and myth. The most interesting are the LCAs, which include subjects like ‘pot of gold’ – consisting entirely of imagining the pot of gold at the end of an imaginary

rainbow – ‘powers of sleepwalking’, and ‘maths and beauty’. At New Dawn, skill and application-based learning with a focus on the creative arts and imagination often seems to take precedence over the RLS subjects and rote-learning or exam-taking. The RLSs, in fact, are taught by senior students from grades 11 and 12. Terms such as ‘miss’, ‘ma’am’, or ‘sir’ are not used for any teacher.

That the traditional teacher-student relationship is not in effect is also clear when students are shown as intervening in deciding their own homework assignments and monitoring themselves for the same. Homework includes social outreach, building a YouTube channel, and other projects that focus on being innovative with the principles that are taught in class. For instance, for one project, groups are formed across MCA classes so that students bring together the skills learnt by them, creating projects as complex as terrariums, solar cookers, and mobile applications (Seshan, *Sisters* 63).

Within this system, however, lurk remnants of the more familiar circuits of power at school. A teacher says the all too familiar “It’s a shame your previous school did not teach you to raise your hand before speaking”, students flock to an LCA course that they think is nonsensical because the teacher “throws marks”, and “punctuality” remains a part of students’ “behaviour record” (Seshan, *Sisters* 20, 24, 34). In addition to this, power is exercised by prefects and senior students who take classes as well, as seen in their tone. Far from familiarising the system at New Dawn to a new student who is confused at the absence of a “real” teacher in an RLS, the senior student who is teaching taunts, “Am I invisible to you?” as other students laugh (Seshan, *Sisters* 8). After explaining that she is taking the class, the senior remarks, “Now, if I am real enough for you, will you come in?” (Seshan, *Sisters* 8). Another senior, also a prefect, states that “good behaviour includes respecting your senior” even as he picks on a new student in the class he teaches by purposefully asking her questions he knows she cannot answer (Seshan, *Sisters* 33, 70, 73).

There is an underlying network of power amongst the students. Gossip and rumours circulate freely, especially amongst the students in the hostel after the day-boarders go home. Not only are there rumours about Kannagi having burst firecrackers at school, but she is expected to prove them to be false as a senior accuses her of “making no effort to prove that the rumours going around are baseless” (Seshan, *Sisters* 110). The focus on creative and innovative projects also brings its own pressure, as social capital seems to be accrued by coming up with something truly out-of-the-box. A teacher is described as requiring not only “excellence” but “perfection”. Kannagi spends days in the library because, even as the “pressure is mounting”, she wishes to avoid “boring ideas” (Seshan, *Sisters* 104). Unable to come up with an exciting idea of their own, two seniors steal Kannagi’s idea when she shares it with them in the spirit of open discussion. This pressure is taken to the extreme as Padma, feeling pushed to do something exciting for her LCA project on sleepwalking, decides with her partner to take sleeping pills without a prescription to observe their effect. On being asked why, she exclaims, “[W]e wanted it to be special” and “I wanted to do something grand” (Seshan, *Sisters* 87, 98).

This results in Padma and Kannagi getting caught in a circuit of bullying and blackmail. On being discovered while taking sleeping pills for the project, Padma is blackmailed to smuggle firecrackers into the school, as she is a day-boarder. In another instance of blackmail, two prefects ask Padma to make their project, threatening to reveal information that they convince her is true – that her father has a criminal record. This false information is perpetrated due to an administrative issue. Kannagi and Padma are put on probation for hostel accommodation because their birth certificates, which were issued a few years after their date of birth on account of them being adopted, are under special scrutiny following a wave of false certificates. However, on seeing a school rule that states that children of alums will automatically receive

hostel accommodation unless the alum has a criminal record, Kannagi and Padma assume the worst.

At one level, the sisters do not report the bullying because of both, social capital, and the belief that they must protect their family's honour. As Padma says about the bully, “if I don't do what he asks me to do, he'll put [the information] on Instagram” (Seshan, *Sisters* 116). Similarly, Kannagi remarks how she would have reported anything else “[but] this...How can we let the school know that Appa is...?” believing that she must protect him (Seshan, *Sisters* 135). On a deeper level, however, the bullying is possible in the first place because both Padma and Kannagi are blocked from access to information. In an attempt to protect them from knowing the real reason behind their not getting a hostel – their birth certificates being under scrutiny – the girls are initially not even told that their father is an alumnus of the same school. When she finds out that her father is an alumnus, Kannagi feels confused and betrayed – “I felt...betrayed. Betrayed that Appa had not told us that he had studied at New Dawn” (Seshan, *Sisters* 39). On asking her father why this information was withheld, she is cryptically told, “I promise there's a reason why I didn't tell you” (Seshan, *Sisters* 40). At several points in the text, Kannagi expresses the desire for open communication with her parents – “I wish he would just talk to us!” and later, on learning that the school principal was in on the secret, “But we need to know! What happened? Why are we waiting? What is wrong? Why won't anyone talk to us?” (Seshan, *Sisters* 30, 141).

In an important turn in the text, the parents and the principal apologise and take accountability for withholding information as a form of protection.

“You should just have told us everything,” I repeated. “That Appa was at New Dawn, that this thing is there in the booklet, that this *system* exists. That's all.”

“Yes,” said Appa, finally. “Yes, we should have. We just thought...” He lifted his shoulders apologetically. “We just thought we could protect you from all of this. We wanted to protect you from a system that sometimes forgets that everyone is not the same.” (Seshan, *Sisters* 147)

The parents tried but failed to conceal something that could be potentially hurtful to their children. This reveals the limitations of the adult urge to control the flow of information. Both Padma and Kannagi possessed a form of “double awareness”. While the adults feigned innocence about them being on probation for hostel accommodation, the girls saw through this innocence and assumed the worst. The adults’ lack of transparency functioned as an exercise of power that allowed the girls to get trapped in a cycle of blackmail over the same information. Reimer notes that, in the “typical” school story, “the new scholar learns first to understand, then to accept, and finally to excel at” the ways of the new school (Seshan, *Sisters* 292). Here, Padma and Kannagi do more than fit in and excel as they also expose the cracks in the adult worldview.

There is another level at which adult understanding is desired. While the New Dawn school minimizes the teacher-student power hierarchy, it ignores the flourishing network of power that exists amidst students themselves. This too stems from the idea of the child as an ‘innocent’ being outside of the power relations of the adult world. In the tradition of the school story, the school has been imagined as a “microcosm” of the world outside (Leotescu 233). It is seen as a “little world” preparing the students for “successful adulthood” in the “wide world” outside (Reimer 276). In New Dawn school, students are prepared to challenge adult-child hierarchies and traditional models of pedagogy through application-based learning, equal voice and participation, and a model of self-reflection rather than punishment. However, adults in the book ignore that the school is located within and not outside the power hierarchies prevalent in the world. Despite adult protection, ‘hidden’ power relations seep into the school as a ‘shadow’.

Dhara's Revolution

Seshan's *Dhara's Revolution* presents a school that is directly positioned as a 'microcosm' of the world – the 'revolution' of the title refers to Dhara's idea of conducting student elections in the school. Early in the book, when the school issues a notice asking for donations to build a new "state-of-the-art" assembly hall for the students, Dhara is indignant. The school calls the students "future citizens" and yet, they have no say in decisions made the management (Seshan, *Dhara* 17). "No one – *no one* – ever asks children what they want," she remarks, "Don't you think they should? Don't we have the right to tell the school what we want?" (Seshan, *Dhara* 17). Dhara's idea takes shape when she is inspired in civics class to take a democratic exercise prevalent in the adult world and execute it inside the school – elections.

Initially distracted in class, Dhara grumbles to herself,

"Why did they need to learn about adult things like taxes, elections, and voting for the right candidate?"

Dhara's breath caught. Adult things...Elections and the government made no difference to her because she couldn't vote. Frantically, Dhara flipped through the pages of her social studies textbook." (Seshan, *Dhara* 35)

By bringing elections to the school, Dhara shapes it as a 'microcosm' where "adult things" can be practised. Student councils are often seen as a way for students to practice exercising their right to select their representatives and for the representatives to practice holding positions of responsibility.

In *Dhara's Revolution*, however, power enacts a clear boundary between ideation and execution. While Dhara comes up with the idea, her teacher, Chandra ma'am, is necessary for its execution. To begin with, it is Chandra ma'am who prompts students to think of something "revolutionary" in the first place – "Every Monday, I'm going to ask you what you can do that

will make a difference to the world around you” (Seshan, *Dhara* 2). Dhara argues that students should have a say in any new school infrastructure. Chandra ma’am prompts her to think of a way in which student voices can be heard without there being an overwhelming amount of individual ideas. Refusing to “give [her] a solution”, Chandra ma’am pointedly leaves ideation to Dhara, focusing only on executing her ideas (Seshan, *Dhara* 30). Execution takes the form of helping Dhara talk to the principal, prompting the principal to talk to the school management, and handling the logistics of a school-wide election. Such power is out of reach for Dhara, who is in fourth grade and amongst the youngest in the school.

Similarly, the book presents clear boundaries in terms of parental power. When a student asks if she can make a social media page for her campaign, Chandra ma’am defers this decision to her parent –

“Do your parents allow you to use social media?” asked Chandra Ma’am.

‘No.’

‘Then the answer is no. However, if you ask your parents to send me a picture, I will share one...An e-poster, perhaps...each day on our school’s social media pages and parent groups.’

‘But parents won’t be voting, right?’ asked Humerah.

‘No, but parents do talk to their children, don’t they?’ Chandra Ma’am replied. (Seshan, *Dhara* 49)

In this way, parental power remains intact in the book, which even acknowledges parental influence on children through conversation.

What sets *Dhara’s Revolution* apart is the emphasis on leadership by fourth graders. In initiating elections, Dhara is insistent that a fourth grader should lead the council, as she reasons

that they are the youngest and the school management’s decisions will affect them for a long time to come. Dhara also points out how the existing prefectural system does little more than monitor behaviour, consisting of older students who “only wanted the fourth standard children to cut their nails, stand in line, polish their shoes and stop talking” – the colonial remnants of what ‘civilised’ behaviour is (Seshan, *Dhara* 45). The conceptualisation of childhood has colonial underpinnings as colonized natives were seen as childlike ‘primitives’ who needed the guidance of the colonizer to move towards maturity or ‘civilisation’ (Nandy 360). This is particularly important when we consider Indian Children’s Literature in English, as its beginnings as a category are in British-produced texts to educate Indians in line with Macaulay’s minute (Superle 22).

Just as adults see children as ‘inferior’ versions of themselves, so too the older students, as they find Dhara’s idea either “ridiculous” or “cute” (Seshan, *Dhara* 57). In opposition to this, Dhara wishes to be taken seriously. When she makes her stance clear to older students who try to take over leadership, she is immediately told, “You’re being childish” (Seshan, *Dhara* 70). The book shows how Dhara regains control, unwilling to let power be enacted in the form of control by those older than her. Instead of presenting the student council as a way for older students to learn responsibility *for* the adult world, *Dhara’s Revolution* presents it as a way for younger students to articulate concerns *in* school life. In the book, school is not only a preparation ground for adult life, but a life experience of its own.

Conclusion

In both *Dhara’s Revolution* and *Sisters at New Dawn*, the child is not an ‘innocent’ being existing outside of power relations but a participant in complex networks of power involving both adults and other children. Adult ‘protection’ from the workings of power not only limits children’s voices but can also actively harm them. Both books show how adult transparency,

advocacy, and accountability are important elements in children's navigation of power. When adult presence is transparent and leans towards advocating for children's voices, children's power is not illusory or escapist but a sphere of action which is operable with limits.

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