

THE NEED FOR USING UNBIASED AND CULTURALLY SENSITIVE CONTENT IN THE CONTEXT OF TEACHING LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE TO YOUNG LEARNERS: A THEORETICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Mostly British and other European authors created all the fairy tales and bedtime stories for children in the age of the colonial rule of the European powers. Looking at this literature for children, most of the stories carry a strong yet subtle message that the white skin is alone superior and beautiful. Starting from rhymes for school children to the subject content introduced at the tertiary level for learning English and literature, the students are continuously exposed to the idea that the white colour holds superiority over other colours. This paper focuses on the necessity of introducing culturally sensitive and unbiased subject content in the curriculum to facilitate a better learning outcome to learners. The present study approaches the topic by emphasizing the need to include learning resources, in the context of English language teaching, which do not foreground the idea that white colour/complexion, is superior to the dark colour.

Keywords: *White complexion, cultural sensitivity, ideology, subject content*

In English literature, one finds ample evidence where the white complexion is glorified by projecting it as the colour of the elite and socially affluent. Further, it is shown as the prerequisite to consider someone as good looking. Hence, the concept of beauty is mostly defined in terms of possessing fair skin in literature. On the other hand, people who are dark skinned are shown with negative shades and characters. This polarity of perception is attempted and perpetrated by literary writers who knowingly or unknowingly support this unjust ideology.

We often find stories and rhymes meant for children mentioning words about skin colour as fair, flawless, colour of the rose and milk white. The following instances from literary rhymes will attempt to illustrate how the white/fair complexion is given undue importance over the black complexion and how it is perceived to be the symbol for beauty and class distinctions. A very commonly learnt rhyme like, "Mary had a little lamb" by Sarah Josepha Hale, mentions about a little girl Mary whose goat's fleece is white as snow. The other common rhyme, which is widely taught at the elementary level is the rhyme "Chubby Cheeks",

which goes like this : “ Chubby cheeks, dimple chin, Rosy lips, teeth within, Curly hair, very fair, Eyes are blue - lovely too. Teachers pet, is that you? Yes, Yes, Yes”. These are only a few instances in the rhymes meant for children, which indirectly espouse the idea that the white colour is elegant and attractive. These colour discriminatory words however have a strong impact on the minds of young children during their formative years. In this way, the child develops a state of mind which believes that fair is beautiful and dark is ugly.

Similarly, the learning resources and the subject content used for learning English at the secondary and tertiary level also project the same idea that white complexion is a definite advantage that carries a host of social benefits. The following examples from widely read classics will provide ample evidence for this aforementioned idea. For instance, In *The Merchant of Venice*, when Shakespeare introduces Portia, he uses the expression, “And she is fair and—fairer than that word” (8). Similarly, In Act 2 scene 4 in the same play, Lorenzo plans to elope with Jessica, the daughter of Shylock. His friend Lancelot comes with a letter from Jessica. Without opening the letter, Lorenzo is able to identify the writer by looking at the handwriting. He remarks, “I know the hand. In faith, ’tis a fair hand, And whiter than the paper it writ on, Is the fair hand that writ. (8). In the story of the “The Little Mermaid”, by Hans Christian Andersen, the story of the youngest child of the eight children is considered to be the prettiest and her skin is referred to that as “clear and delicate as a rose-leaf, and her eyes as blue as the deepest sea” [3].

In one of the poems, William Shakespeare has compared a woman’s beauty to that of the day “But thy Eternal summer shall not fade, Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st;” [4]. Through these instances, one can understand how literary writers in their works always hold white complexion in high esteem. In this way, the superiority of white colour over black colour is established and reiterated in the minds of young learners at the secondary and tertiary level. .

Literature has intentionally or unintentionally contributed to the glorification of white complexion in its creative output. This subtle trait, which is reinforced repeatedly by writers, could lead to a sense of inferiority complex in learner’s behaviour. This is especially possible in countries where the predominant or natural complexion is either black or brown. In these countries, the students may unconsciously imbibe this notion by reading such texts. Such attitude could lead them to behave in two different ways, which are polar opposites in nature.

On one hand, they may be driven to buy cosmetic items and try to add a layer of fairness using them. On the other hand, they may develop a repulsive behaviour towards such texts, which in turn might result in learning disability. The former reaction is more of a sociological concern, which does not come under the purview of the present study. As the latter one concerns learning behaviour in the context of acquiring English skills, it assumes great significance.

It is a well-known fact that several factors contribute to an effective teaching-learning ambience. These factors include a proper infrastructure, qualified faculty members, effective testing pattern, and most importantly a well-defined curriculum. It is important that the curriculum should include only the subject content, which does not support this unjust ideology, which glorifies the white complexion. Movies and advertisements in any cultural context aggressively promote the superiority of white skin over the dark ones. This has to be at least tackled and combated, even if it is minimally in the academic set up by ensuring that learning materials used by students should not endorse this idea directly or indirectly.

This can be done by carefully selecting materials, which are free from such prejudiced propositions. In the context of English language teaching in non-white environment, utmost care should be taken by curriculum planners to introduce learning materials (prose, poetry, fiction, drama and activities) at the school and collegiate level, which do not subscribe to this lopsided view. By introducing culturally sensitive and relevant learning resources, the learners will be encouraged to learn English in a comfort ambience, which does not intimidate them psychologically in any way.

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