

Sexism in *Doraemon* and *Shinchan*: Interrogating Popular Cartoon Shows through a Feminist Lens

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Abstract

*With the gradual destruction of nature and the rise of urbanization, children's world is becoming confined within the four walls, making cartoon characters their best friends. Just like the Ideological State Apparatuses mentioned by Althusser such as school or family, cartoon shows, or rather, media in general, also perform(s) significant function in teaching values, including negative ones like the sexist values, to the young, impressionable children viewers. Sexism functions in cartoon shows through various means, for instance, through advocating gender and sexual binary, supporting conventional gender norms and gender stereotypes, and through objectification of women. The methodology followed in this paper is the methodology of content analysis, interrogating selected episodes from these two shows and situating these episodes within the theoretical framework of Feminism. This paper, therefore, attempts a critical investigation of how sexism subtly becomes a part and parcel of two of the globally most popular cartoon shows, i.e., *Doraemon* and *Shinchan*.*

Keywords: Gender; Patriarchy; Heteronormativity; Binary; Sexism; Cartoons

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Introduction

Modernity's increasing isolation is confining childhood to the world of television and internet, making cartoons the best friends of children. Whereas the negative impacts of watching cartoons on eyesight, concentration or behavioural problems of children are often acknowledged by specialists as well as guardians, impacts relating to social evils are often overlooked. Although these issues operate in many shows like *Perman*, *Phineas and Ferb*, *Chhota Bheem* and so on, *Shinchan* and *Doraemon*, two of the most popular cartoon shows, affect children more significantly than the other ones. Therefore *Doraemon* and *Shinchan* need to be analyzed critically.

Shinchan and *Doraemon* have been analyzed by critics from different perspectives. Situating *Doraemon* in the context of Japan's preference for robotics over technology in rebuilding post-war Japan, Mark Gilson contrasts *Doraemon*'s "super-deformed" shape to the popular concept of the structure of robots (368). Robert C. Marshall suggests that Socially Assistive Robots like *Doraemon* might be useful to look after elderly people, because whereas *Doraemon* fails to reform Nobita due to his extremely affectionate indulgence which borders on mothering, *Doraemon* could be a perfect companion for the elderly who need not reformation but rather physical and emotional care (26-40). Indeed, as R. Marshall illustrates through a structural analysis of *Doraemon*, the very basis of the show's popularity is the paradoxical fact that practices of mothering both help and hinder the building of children's character in such a way that they may succeed in outside world. K.S. Rajashri discusses how cartoon shows like *Doraemon* play immense role in framing the value system and the range of emotions of the children viewers (75-83). Avijit Ghosh shows, citing several examples, how *Shinchan*'s misbehaving with elders is imitated by children (n.p.). Anggita Prameswari and Yuliani Rahmah have attempted to situate *Doraemon* within an ecocritical framework particularly in reference to the movie *Doraemon: Nobita No Kyouryuu*. N.N. Islam & Tuhin Biswas discuss how the popularity of Hindi-dubbed *Doraemon* causes a linguistic imperialism by coercing children of Bangladesh into using more Hindi words in place of Bengali or English ones (204-214). Another similar survey has been conducted on 200 Pakistani children between the age group 6-11, interrogating how watching the Hindi-dubbed episodes of *Doraemon* impacts language learning of these children, also focusing on how this impact is dependent on age and gender (Rawan et al.). An aspect, however, that needs further critical attention is how these cartoon shows advocate patriarchy.

Reproduction of the conditions of Production

According to Althusser, "in order to exist, every social formation must reproduce the conditions of its production at the same time as it produces, and in order to be able to produce" (86). Like all social formations or constructs sexism also, in order to function as a dominant force of society, needs to fabricate the social structure in such a way that the structure will in turn nourish sexism. Althusser discusses how institutions like school, church and family work on behalf of the state as Ideological State Apparatuses, to inject into people certain "'rules' of good behaviour" to be followed (89). Whereas the Repressive State Apparatus – which consists of institutions belonging to the public sphere like the government, army, police, administration, prisons, courts etc. – functions primarily through the exertion of physical or, more often, non-physical violence, the Ideological State Apparatuses comprises institutions from the private sphere and function primarily through ideologies and value systems and only secondarily through repression. Sexism, however, not only makes use of the Ideological State Apparatuses which are mentioned by Althusser, but has also adapted itself to the new ones made available by the development of technology and by the new forms of media – for instance, internet, films, television shows, web series etc. Therefore, projection of patriarchal notions as the "'rules' of good behaviour" in shows like *Doraemon* and *Shinchan* implants sexism deep into children (Althusser 89). They grow up watching and unconsciously learning sexism, and by the time they become adults they become trained enough to strengthen the sexist society, which by that time becomes normalized enough to them.

Marginalization through the politics of invisibilization

Not only do *Doraemon* and *Shinchan* invisibilize people who belong outside the gender and sexuality binaries by denying them any representation, but these shows also explicitly prioritize manhood over womanhood. The protagonists, Nobita and *Shinchan*, are boys. The socio-cultural

obsession with everyone having well-defined gender identities is evident from the fact that even the cat-robot Doraemon, a non-living entity, is imposed a male identity, mentioned often and reinforced further by the visual difference between him and his sister Doremi. Doraemon is coloured blue, a colour culturally associated with boys, while Doremi possesses girly visual attributes like blushing cheeks, a flower as her tail, red ears which look like a ribbon, and red lines of design on her pocket. Indeed, most cartoon shows with a few exceptions like *Chibi Maruko-Chan* or *Atashin'chi*, use male protagonists, compelling viewers of all genders to identify with those protagonists. Thus the male body gets projected as the genderless, sexless, ideal human body with which children of all genders and sexes can, and should, identify.

Also, in viewing the world from a boy's perspectives and projecting the male experience as the universal human experience, it ignores the fact that the female experience is equally valid, and implicitly teaches the young, impressionable viewers that a girl's experience is not to be talked of openly. Male and female experiences are essentially different, especially because men and women are both treated and conditioned differently by society, and a basic form of oppression on women is "the silencing, marginalization and devaluing of their whole experience, both negative and positive" (Prentice and Pierson 163). Here "silencing" refers to the lack of opportunity to voice one's thoughts and experiences. Although Alison Prentice and Ruth Pierson discuss the politics of "silencing" only in relation to the oppression of women, oppression through invisibilization also functions in rejecting representations to the non-heterosexuals in cartoon shows.

Romantic relationships or romantic advances are shown inevitably between a male and a female, and even Doraemon, a robot, is not spared from heteronormativity. In "Oh, Lovely Mii-Chan" Doraemon falls in love with a toy cat. Conforming to the traditional role of a protective male lover he promises its owners that he will always keep it happy, convinces them to let him take it his home, which can be seen as a comic replica of marriage, and with chivalrous gallantry he fights with and gets wounded by a fierce dog in order to protect the toy. However, when towards the end of the episode he turns it into a cat-robot by installing certain devices into it so that it can reciprocate his feelings, it informs him that it cannot accept Doraemon as husband because it is male. Heartbroken, Doraemon bursts into tears. It occurs to none of the characters present there that love does not need to be bound by gender.

Gender norms and stereotypes

Instances of stereotypes imposed on genders are scattered throughout the shows. Since science and technology are traditionally believed to be fields belonging exclusively to men, women are shown to be lagging in using technology and gadgets. "Mom Takes Driving Lessons" shows Mitsy as a horrible driver who performs worse than even Shinchan, a five years old child, and in "Mom Learns to Use a Computer" she finds it extremely difficult to operate a computer while Harry is adept in it and even the children learn it easily, and for this she is insulted by them. In many episodes men are portrayed stereotypically as flirtatious, disloyal, and women as quarrelsome and dominating. P. Herlambang and J.M. Djundjung write about *Crayon Shinchan*, the Japanese Manga which gave birth to *Shinchan*, that although in this Manga men and women assume feminine and masculine aspects respectively, the basic patriarchal structure remains unchanged. They focus on the fact that unlike in Japanese culture, here the women are authoritative, aggressive and impatient, whereas the men are presented as being calm and afraid of women (9-15). What this analysis fails to take into consideration is, this inter-change of gender-characteristics is not contrary to but is rather supportive in strengthening patriarchy. With the rise of feminism patriarchy is adopting subversive ways for survival. Blatant descriptions of women being dominated by men would not lead to its replication and would rather create sympathy for women. Therefore, comics and cartoons are instead demeaning women in a subtler way, apparently giving the women positions of power and showing men as victims.

Yet these cartoon shows put extreme emphasis on the strict conformity to the socially prescribed gender roles. The traditional pattern of men functioning as breadwinners of the family and women as housewives is maintained in the families of not only Shinchan and Nobita, but also of most of their friends and acquaintances. Although it seems to be a decision of women themselves to remain housewives, a critical investigation shows that the matter is not so linear. In "Mom's New

Job is Difficult" Mitsy works very hard in a shop and even accepts undeserved reproaches from her supervisor because she is determined to earn. Yet at last she leaves the job to be with her daughter. Here apparently Mitsy is driven by her motherly feeling, yet this feeling is not a natural instinct but a social construct that a mother's primary duty is caring for her children. Such values are socio-culturally inherited by women and prevent women from entering the economic sphere. This reflects Marjorie Cohen's claim in her study of the problematic inclusion of "women's economic behaviour" in economic analyses (148). According to Cohen, a "perfectly competitive" market cannot exist, since "(Female) labour, particularly for married women, is also severely restricted in its mobility" (154, 156). Women workers, therefore, have less access to market, and even when they are able to work, they are, as Helen Levine argues, "locked into subordinate, service, adjunctive positions" (246). For instance, in Shinchon's school the principal is male while the vice-principal and other teachers are female. A glimpse of Harry's office in "A Visit to Daddy's Office" shows him having both male and female subordinates, but only male peers and male boss. This episode also hints at the problem of a housewife's not having any personal money. As household works are not paid for, housewives like Mitsy must save money for personal needs from the housekeeping money itself. The episode, however, presents the matter from a patriarchal perspective, showing that Harry gives his salary to his wife, from which she gives him a small portion as allowance. She keeps the rest, and when he asks for more money, she angrily refuses with the selfish intention of using that money, on which she has no right, for herself. The fact that she has to manage all the expenses of the family from that money, and the money she calls her own is actually gathered up by her small savings, and therefore is rightfully her own, is completely overlooked. While Cohen analyzes how significantly the Gross National Product of any country will change if the economic value of the work performed by women in the domestic sphere is considered (150), even more significant will be its social impact in the lives of the housewives like Mitsy, whose works are completely unacknowledged.

The very basis of *Doraemon*, that Doraemon is sent to Nobita from the future by Nobita's descendant Sewashi in order to organize Nobita's life so that their family can be saved from extreme economic crisis, is problematic in itself. Doraemon's being sent to Nobita and not to his wife presupposes that economic responsibility of family rests solely on the men. Thus, it conforms to the binary that men belong to the public sphere – the sphere of the market economy where money can be earned – while women belong to private sphere - which is conventionally believed in Neoclassical Economics to have its significance in the market economy as only the consumer, as Cohen discusses. Therefore, while men function as money earners, the domestic unit in which women belong functions as money spender. However, women as individuals are believed to have not much significance in the economic structure, which is ironic in view of the fact that the word "economy" developed from the Greek word "Oikonomia", which came in turn from "oikos" – meaning "habitat" or "household", and "nemein" – meaning "management" (Imran et al., 2019). Therefore "economy" literally refers to the management of the household which is primarily taken care of by the women members of the family.

The fact that women perform all household works without any appreciation also forms the basis of "Patta Nehi Mom Hamesha Daatti Kiu Rehti Haay". Since everybody wakes up late in the morning, Harry becomes tensed that he might be late for his office and creates a mess in his panic. Mitsy, however, manages the situation cool-headedly and helps him in every step of getting prepared for office. Even after Harry leaves, she continues to work constantly, making special tiffin for Shinchon and preparing him for his school, while he only plays around. She gets no time to spend for herself. Yet, her strenuous labour is not acknowledged by anyone, and is rather mocked, not only by the food prepared by her getting spilled by Shinchon and his not feeling sorry for it, but also by the very title itself. In English the title means "Why is mom always scolding?", even though she is scolding only when necessary. The title voices the social expectation that women should perform all household tasks silently, without expressing anger even when there are ample reasons.

Another instance of Mitsy's efforts and emotions for Shinchon being completely unacknowledged can be found in "Tricycles are Fun". Although she doesn't want to, she buys him a tricycle because he wants it, and yet he starts complaining about the tricycle as soon as they reach

home. Although she reproaches him for such behaviour, immediately afterwards she becomes conscious that her words may hurt him. Later when he goes out to play with the tricycle on the road, she feels very anxious that there might be some accident and he might get injured. Therefore, she herself runs behind him to protect him from dangers, and in her attempt to protect him she risks her own life as she gets into a position where she is about to be run over by a car. However, Shinchan doesn't even notice her efforts and continues his reckless tricycle ride, barely saving himself before the newly purchased tricycle falls into a river. Mitsy herself gets into the river to find it, searches through mud and garbage, and even when she wants to give up, she doesn't, because she thinks Shinchan will be very upset to lose his beloved tricycle.

Here Mitsy is motivated not merely by her spontaneous parental love for her child, but also by her sense of responsibility as a mother - responsibilities into which she is socio-culturally conditioned. She feels guilty whenever she realizes that she has not been capable to conform to the conventional role of a perfect mother, and indeed it is this guilt that dictates her course of action throughout the episode. Shinchan, however, does not pay any heed to her sacrifices for him, and instead, runs away to watch his favourite television show without even informing her, leaving her in further emotional crisis as she continues to search the tricycle in the muddy river.

In "Winning Back Shizuka Chan" the boys claim they don't need to learn cooking because their wives will cook for them after their mothers. When Nobita's mother forces him to help in chores and Doraemon offers him a gadget which will teach him the chores, Nobita refuses Doraemon's gadget saying that as a boy he does not need to learn the chores properly. While later, afraid of losing Shizuka, he wants to project himself as an expert in the domestic works, he still does not think the domestic works worth learning for a boy, and uses Doremi's gadget-apron instead. Although at the end he decides to learn domestic works, he is not motivated by Dekisugi's explanation of why men should also do housework, but is simply interested in impressing Shizuka, which becomes evident from the fact that Doraemon and Doremi, wishing that Nobita continues learning housework, decide to hide from him the information that Shizuka will not leave him and will marry him in future. Thus, while the episode apparently teaches that everyone should learn housework, the narrative of the episode suggests that it is not normative and boys do not usually do this. It seems obvious that the children viewers will follow the attitude of the protagonist Nobita, whom they love and with whom they identify, rather than the moralistic tone of Dekisugi who is reputed for being a boring nerd.

Patriarchy not only teaches women to prioritize marriage and motherhood as the most important aspects of life, but also convinces them that following of this "sexist prescription" is not imposed on them but is their "free choice" (Levine 246). Practical consequences of this teaching can be traced in Mitsy's leaving her job in "Mom's New Job is Difficult" or in Shizuka's ambition to become a good 'friend' when she grows up, as expressed in "Nobita's Bride", while the whole episode uses the concept of friend as an unmistakable euphemism for a spouse. As glimpses of the future are shown through Doraemon's gadgets, Nobita, a below-average student, does a job in an office in future, whereas his wife Shizuka becomes a housewife. Both Shizuka and Dekisugi are brilliant students, but, as "Winning Back Shizuka Chan" shows, in future she stays home caring for her family, while he becomes a Mars-scientist. Whereas the patriarchal perspective associates women with nature and believes women to be "nurturant" and "emotional", men are supposed to be logical and capable of abstract thinking, and therefore most professions, particularly those related to science, are to be dominated by men (Benston 61), and Shizuka, unlike Dekisugi, cannot become a scientist; she can only have the pseudo-agency of not wishing to be one.

"Nobita and Shizuka are changing their selves" points at the burden of gender norms imposed on children, particularly on girls. Shizuka is restricted from performing "masculine" acts like climbing trees or playing baseball which Nobita, as a boy, is expected to perform, although he does not like these games. When Shizuka and Nobita interchange their bodies using Doraemon's gadget, Shizuka, in the form of Nobita, plays baseball and with remote-control car which she is never shown doing as a girl in any episode. Although she is probably participating in such sports for the first time, she plays baseball very well, suggesting that she could have become a successful baseball player only if she could play regularly. Nobita as Shizuka, on the other hand, is happy to

play the ‘girly’ games like cat's cradle and skipping. He does not seem to be bothered at all even when he gets injured while playing, whereas whenever he gets injured while playing as a boy, he starts crying. It suggests that being able to play the ‘feminine’ games gives him intense pleasure, making him overlook his physical injuries. Nevertheless, Nobita soon gets irritated by the sexist restrictions imposed on him for being a girl. Shizuka's mother constantly preaches him to behave in the ‘feminine’ manner, to sit with folded legs in a proper girly fashion, not to express happiness by shouting. She is shocked to find him gobbling food, although no note is ever taken by anyone of his eating in this manner as a boy. Nobita wants to return to his own body, but Shizuka, apparently enjoying her male freedom, including freedom of sitting and walking in a non-feminine way, is unwilling to return Nobita's body. It is only at the time of having bath that she realizes that Nobita may have a look at her naked body, the body he presently resides in. Shizuka rushes to stop Nobita who, also realizing this, was just going to utilize this prospect. Therefore, although she does not want to become a girl again leaving the male privileges, she has to, because as a girl she believes more important than her freedom and enjoyment is her modesty and chastity, which includes her duty of preventing others from looking at her naked body. Nobita experiences no such fear of his body being viewed by her, because society imposes the responsibilities of preventing sexual transgressions only on women. This episode therefore not only shows the gender-norms, but also shows that socially imposed restraints become more powerful than individual freedom and satisfaction, especially for women.

Objectification

The depiction of objectification and sexual violence in *Shinchan* and *Doraemon* are potential of leading children to commit sex-based crimes. Nobita's voyeuristic attempts to look at Shizuka's naked body, chiefly by peeping into her washroom with Doraemon's gadgets, and Doraemon's stopping Nobita from such mischievous act, recur in many episodes almost like a trope. In "Doctor's Bag", having a gadget to treat sick people, throughout the episode Nobita insists on doing a medical examination of her body in order to look at it even though she is not ill. His voyeuristic intention becomes clear when at the end she becomes ill. He hides from her the fact that he does not possess any medicine to treat her, and under the pretence of medical examination he makes her take off her shirt so that he can look at her bare body. In "Goodbye Shizuka Chan" Nobita intentionally lifts Shizuka's skirt to offend her. While this episode shows that this is an improper behaviour, the narrative also suggests that it is a good weapon to tease a girl, and is very likely to be adopted by little boys as a way of offending girls, for instance, while having a fight with a female friend.

In *Shinchan* objectification occurs chiefly through acts of flirtations. Although only five years old, he flirts with almost all pretty young women he meets, implying that a pretty woman is not an individual person but just an object of flirtation. In "I Go to Girl-Zoo", when Shinchan and his grandfather mistakenly go to a women's college instead of the zoo, they feel elated to be surrounded by so many young women, they flirt with the women, and perform tricks to win the women's attention. The title of the episode itself equates the college to a zoo and women to animals, further reinstating the dehumanization and objectification of women. In "I Go Skiing" Shinchan flirts with and follows unknown women. In Mexico he starts flirting even with his teacher (*Crayon Shin-chan: My Moving Story! Cactus Large Attack!*). The visual portrayal of this teacher with slender waist and large breasts further instancifies objectification. Although Soumyaseema's claim that both *Shinchan* and *Doraemon* portray Madonna-whore syndrome is somewhat hyperbolic, yet the acts of objectification in these shows cannot be ignored. Indeed it is these objectifications, along with Shinchan's "mooning" and "risque spoonerisms", which lead to *Shinchan's* being labelled as "borderline pornography" in Indonesia, and also to its broadcasting getting stopped in India for one year unless it was "sanitized", i.e., unless the controversial parts were removed (McCurry n.p.).

Nevertheless, *Shinchan* objectifies men as well. Shinchan's toddler sister Himawari gets attracted to every handsome man she comes across. In "I Go along with Miss Matsuzaka", Shinchan's kindergarten teacher Miss Matsuzaka's desperate attempts of impressing any handsome man manifests a kind of husband-hunting. Even when she is sick and is admitted in hospital in the

episode “Matsuzaka Maam and I are Admitted in the Hospital”, she and her sisters continuously fight for the handsome young doctor’s attention.

Conclusion: Deceptive Narrative

Sometimes *Doraemon* and *Shinchan* appear to function against or beyond sexism. For example, Nobita is not unemotional but cries frequently, Dekisugi loves cooking, and Shinchan's aunt is a rising photographer. However, it is always made clear that these are only exceptions against the accepted norms of society, and there is no attempt at inclusion of these exceptions within the mainstream. Almost analogical with the way Margot Norris interrogates Joyce’s story (93-108), here also the narrative suggests something different from what is narrated, and through the portrayal of apparently anti-patriarchal notions, in reality further strengthens patriarchy.

Suggested Works for Future

This paper has attempted to analyze the crucial role played by *Shinchan* and *Doraemon* in creating sexist mindsets in children and thus strengthening patriarchy from the very grassroots level. However, there are other aspects of these shows which, along with their impacts on the viewers, deserve critical attention. For instance, the way infantile sexuality functions in determining Shinchan's behaviour needs to be analyzed. The regular physical and psychological bullying of Nobita by Gian and Suneo, who represent physical and economic superiority respectively, also needs to be surveyed. As cartoon shows have tremendous power over the psyches of children, analyzing the forces acting in them is particularly necessary.

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