

**Children's Rights, Gendered Citizenship and the Politics of Voice in
Dear Mrs. Naidu: Reimagining Indian Children's Literature through
Mathangi Subramanian's Narrative of Social Justice**

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Abstract:

Contemporary Indian children's literature has increasingly moved beyond moral instruction and entertainment to engage with questions of citizenship, social justice and democratic participation. Mathangi Subramanian's *Dear Mrs. Naidu* represents a significant intervention in this evolving literary landscape. Through the story of Sarojini, a young girl living in an urban informal settlement who seeks access to education and social recognition, the novel redefines the possibilities of childhood in Indian literature. This paper argues that *Dear Mrs. Naidu* inaugurates a distinctive mode of rights-based children's writing in which the child emerges not as a passive subject of protection but as an active participant in democratic processes. Drawing upon theories from childhood studies, feminist criticism, cultural studies, and subaltern discourse, the study examines the novel's representation of gender, class, education, and civic agency. Particular attention is paid to the narrative's engagement with the Right to Education framework, its reconstruction of female childhood and its portrayal of collective action. The paper demonstrates that Subramanian expands the thematic boundaries of Indian children's literature by foregrounding structural inequality while simultaneously affirming children's capacity for political imagination and social transformation.

Keywords: Indian children's literature, child agency, gender studies, citizenship, Right to Education, Mathangi Subramanian

Introduction

Children's literature in India has historically occupied an uneasy position between entertainment and instruction. Much of the literature produced for children during the colonial and postcolonial periods sought to inculcate moral virtues, national values and social conformity. From mythological retellings and folktales to school stories and adventure

narratives, the child protagonist often functioned as a figure through whom adult society communicated lessons regarding discipline, obedience, patriotism and ethical conduct. While these texts undoubtedly played an important role in shaping literary cultures for young readers, they rarely granted children substantial political agency. Childhood was imagined primarily as a preparatory stage for adulthood rather than a meaningful social category in its own right.

Recent developments in children's literature, however, have challenged these assumptions. Influenced by the emergence of childhood studies, feminist scholarship and rights-based discourses, contemporary writers increasingly portray children as individuals capable of interpreting and transforming the social worlds they inhabit. In this context, Mathangi Subramanian's *Dear Mrs. Naidu* occupies a particularly significant position. The novel narrates the experiences of Sarojini, a young girl living in a Mumbai slum whose aspirations for education lead her to confront systems of exclusion, poverty and bureaucratic indifference. Through letters addressed to the historical figure Sarojini Naidu, the protagonist articulates her frustrations, hopes and political awakening.

Subramanian is an Indian-American writer and educator whose work consistently foregrounds marginalized voices and questions of social justice. Her commitment to educational equity is reflected throughout the novel, which draws attention to the lived realities of children who remain excluded from the promises of formal citizenship despite constitutional guarantees. Rather than presenting poverty as an individual tragedy, the narrative situates inequality within broader structures of class, gender and governance.

This paper argues that *Dear Mrs. Naidu* represents a transformative moment in Indian children's literature because it introduces a sustained discourse of children's rights and democratic citizenship. Through Sarojini's journey, the novel expands the thematic scope of children's writing beyond personal growth and moral development to include civic engagement, collective activism and structural critique. By bringing together insights from gender studies, cultural studies, childhood studies, and subaltern theory, the paper demonstrates how the text reimagines childhood as a site of political agency and social intervention.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Scholarly engagement with children's literature has undergone a profound transformation during the past four decades. Earlier approaches tended to regard children's books as relatively simple cultural products intended for entertainment or education. Contemporary criticism, however, recognizes children's literature as a significant

ideological and political field in which notions of identity, citizenship, gender and power are produced and contested.

One of the foundational interventions in the field comes from Jacqueline Rose, who argues that children's literature is fundamentally shaped by adult desires and projections. According to Rose, the child represented in literature is often a construction through which adult society articulates its own fantasies and anxieties (Rose 1–12). Her critique is particularly useful for understanding how *Dear Mrs. Naidu* departs from conventional narratives. Rather than speaking for the child, the novel allows Sarojini to narrate her own experiences and articulate her own political demands.

Similarly, Perry Nodelman contends that children's literature frequently establishes asymmetrical power relations between adult authority and child subjectivity. Children are often positioned as incomplete beings who require adult guidance and correction (Nodelman 29). Subramanian's novel challenges this hierarchy by portraying adults not as infallible authorities but as participants in systems that perpetuate inequality. Sarojini often demonstrates greater ethical clarity and political insight than many adults around her.

The emergence of childhood studies has further transformed scholarly understandings of children's agency. Marah Gubar rejects the notion that children are radically different from adults and proposes a "kinship model" that recognizes children as capable social actors (Gubar 450). This framework is especially relevant to *Dear Mrs. Naidu*, where Sarojini's actions contribute directly to social change rather than merely preparing her for adulthood.

The novel's engagement with gender may be examined through feminist scholarship. bell hooks argues that education can function as a practice of freedom through which marginalized individuals challenge structures of domination (hooks 37). Sarojini's struggle for educational access reflects precisely such a liberatory understanding of learning. Education in the novel is not merely a pathway to employment but a means of attaining dignity, self-expression, and political participation.

The concept of intersectionality developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw further illuminates the novel's portrayal of oppression. Sarojini's experiences cannot be understood solely through the lens of gender or class; rather, these categories intersect to produce unique forms of disadvantage. Her identity as a poor girl living in an informal settlement shapes her access to education and social recognition in ways that differ from those experienced by more privileged children.

The paper also draws upon Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's reflections on subalternity and representation. Spivak's famous question—whether the subaltern can speak—remains pertinent to children's literature, where marginalized voices are often mediated by adult institutions. Sarojini's letters function as acts of self-representation that challenge her social invisibility and create a space for subaltern articulation.

The educational philosophy of Paulo Freire provides a useful framework for understanding the novel's emphasis on collective action. Freire rejects passive models of education and advocates dialogic learning that enables individuals to become agents of transformation (Freire 66–81). Sarojini's activism exemplifies this movement from awareness to action. All these theoretical perspectives enable a comprehensive reading of *Dear Mrs. Naidu* as a text that redefines childhood, citizenship and social participation within contemporary Indian children's literature.

Childhood as Citizenship: Reimagining the Child Subject

One of the most innovative aspects of *Dear Mrs. Naidu* is its treatment of childhood as a political category. Traditional children's literature frequently presents children as future citizens whose primary responsibility is preparation for adulthood. Subramanian challenges this model by depicting Sarojini as a citizen in the present.

The narrative repeatedly emphasizes that rights belong to children not because they will someday become adults but because they are already members of society. Sarojini's desire for education is therefore framed not as a personal aspiration alone but as a claim grounded in democratic entitlement. Her encounters with institutional barriers reveal the gap between constitutional ideals and lived realities.

This shift has significant implications for the representation of childhood. Instead of locating agency within adult authorities, the novel positions children themselves as interpreters of justice. Sarojini develops an understanding of social inequality through observation, dialogue, and lived experience. Her political consciousness emerges organically from everyday affairs rather than from formal instruction.

The novel aligns with contemporary childhood studies, which reject developmental models that portray children as incomplete beings. Sarojini is not merely learning how society functions; she is actively evaluating its failures and imagining alternatives. The text thereby recognizes children as participants in democratic culture rather than passive recipients of adult benevolence.

The epistolary form strengthens this political dimension. Writing letters allows Sarojini to construct a public voice capable of engaging historical and national narratives. Her correspondence with Sarojini Naidu symbolically links contemporary struggles for educational justice with earlier movements for political freedom. The result is a powerful reconfiguration of citizenship that includes children within broader conversations about rights and democracy.

Gendered Citizenship and the Making of a Political Girl

Although *Dear Mrs. Naidu* addresses questions of education and citizenship, its intervention is equally significant in the realm of gender representation. Indian children's literature has historically oscillated between two dominant images of girlhood: the obedient daughter whose virtue lies in self-sacrifice and the exceptional heroine whose achievements are often detached from structural social realities. Subramanian departs from both traditions by presenting Sarojini as an ordinary girl whose political consciousness emerges from everyday experiences of inequality.

The choice of naming the protagonist after Sarojini Naidu is central to the novel's feminist architecture. As one of the most prominent women in India's freedom movement, Sarojini Naidu symbolizes female leadership, public participation and political expression. The historical figure functions not merely as an inspirational icon but as an interlocutor through whom the protagonist negotiates her own understanding of citizenship. The letters create a symbolic dialogue across generations, suggesting that struggles for freedom remain incomplete when access to education and social dignity continues to be unevenly distributed. From a feminist perspective, the text challenges patriarchal assumptions regarding children's capacities, particularly those of girls. Feminist theorists have long argued that gender socialization restricts girls' access to public spaces and political participation. As Nivedita Menon observes, gender is not a natural category but a social process through which power relations are reproduced (Menon 24–39). Sarojini's experiences reveal how these relations operate in subtle ways. The obstacles she faces are not simply economic; they are shaped by expectations concerning whose voices matter and whose aspirations deserve recognition. The novel refuses to portray empowerment as an individual achievement alone. Sarojini's development occurs through relationships with family members, friends, teachers and community activists. This collective dimension distinguishes the text from neoliberal narratives that celebrate personal success while ignoring structural inequalities. Instead, empowerment emerges through solidarity and community engagement.

The representation of girlhood in *Dear Mrs. Naidu* also resonates with bell hooks' conception of education as a transformative practice. Hooks argues that learning should enable marginalized individuals to challenge systems of domination rather than merely adapt

to them (hooks 41). Sarojini's educational aspirations embody precisely this transformative impulse. Her desire to attend school is inseparable from a broader desire to participate fully in society.

The novel resists the sentimentalization often associated with representations of poor girls in children's literature. Sarojini is neither idealized nor victimized. She experiences frustration, anger, uncertainty and hope. Such complexity allows the text to move beyond simplistic narratives of rescue. The protagonist does not await salvation from benevolent adults; she becomes an active participant in shaping her future. Through this detailed portrayal, Subramanian expands the representational possibilities available to female characters in Indian children's literature. Girlhood is no longer confined to domestic virtue or individual achievement but becomes a site of civic engagement and political action.

Class, Urban Marginality and the Representation of Inequality

The novel's engagement with class constitutes another major contribution to contemporary children's literature. While poverty has occasionally appeared in Indian children's narratives, it has often been represented as a backdrop for moral lessons or sentimental sympathy. *Dear Mrs. Naidu*, by contrast, approaches poverty as a structural condition produced by social and political arrangements.

Sarojini's life within an urban informal settlement foregrounds forms of inequality that remain largely invisible in mainstream representations of childhood. The city functions as a space of contradiction. It promises opportunity, mobility and development, yet simultaneously reproduces exclusion and precarity. Children inhabiting such environments encounter barriers that extend beyond economic deprivation to include bureaucratic obstacles, inadequate infrastructure and social stigma.

Cultural studies scholars have emphasized that representation plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of marginalized communities. Stuart Hall argues that representation does not merely reflect reality but actively constructs meaning (Hall 15). Subramanian's portrayal of slum life is therefore significant because it challenges dominant narratives that reduce such communities to sites of despair or criminality.

Instead, the novel presents the settlement as a vibrant social world characterized by relationships, aspirations and collective resilience. Residents are depicted as individuals with histories, desires and capacities rather than as anonymous victims. This humanizing approach disrupts stereotypical representations frequently found in media discourse.

It is significant to note that the text does not romanticize poverty. Structural inequalities remain visible throughout the narrative. Access to education becomes a particularly revealing

indicator of these inequalities. Although legal frameworks may guarantee schooling, actual implementation often depends upon factors such as class position, social capital and institutional responsiveness. Sarojini's struggles expose the gap between formal rights and practical realities.

This tension may be understood through Nancy Fraser's distinction between recognition and redistribution. Fraser argues that social justice requires both cultural recognition and material redistribution (Fraser 16–27). The novel implicitly advances a similar argument. Educational exclusion cannot be addressed solely through symbolic acknowledgment; it requires structural change capable of redistributing opportunities and resources.

The representation of class in *Dear Mrs. Naidu* is therefore not merely descriptive but analytical. The narrative encourages readers to recognize poverty as a political issue rather than a personal failing. Such an approach remains relatively uncommon within Indian children's literature and marks a significant expansion of the field's thematic concerns.

Voice, Representation and the Politics of Speaking

One of the most striking feature of *Dear Mrs. Naidu* is its sustained commitment to the question of voice. The novel repeatedly asks who gets to speak, who gets heard and whose experiences become visible within public discourse. The epistolary structure is crucial in this regard. Letters occupy a unique position within literary history because they combine intimacy with public address. Sarojini's letters are deeply personal, yet they simultaneously function as political documents. Through writing, she records experiences that might otherwise remain unacknowledged.

This concern with voice invites comparison with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential reflections on subaltern representation. Spivak argues that marginalized groups often experience the presence of systemic barriers that prevent their experiences from being adequately represented within dominant discourses. Even when they appear to speak, their voices may be filtered through institutional frameworks that distort or silence them (Spivak 271–313).

Subramanian's narrative may be read as an attempt to counter such silencing. The text places the perspective of a marginalized child at its center and grants her interpretive authority over her own experiences. Adult voices do not disappear, but they no longer monopolize narrative meaning. The significance of this strategy becomes particularly evident when considered within the context of children's literature. As Jacqueline Rose notes, children's books often involve adults speaking on behalf of children. *Dear Mrs. Naidu*

challenges this tendency by foregrounding child narration and child interpretation. Sarojini is not simply represented; she becomes a representative voice.

The act of writing itself acquires symbolic importance. Literacy is portrayed not merely as a technical skill but as a means of participating in public life. Through her letters, Sarojini claims a space within national conversations concerning justice, citizenship and equality. Writing becomes a form of democratic engagement.

The novel thereby transforms a seemingly simple narrative device into a sophisticated exploration of representation and power. Voice emerges not as an individual attribute but as a social resource that must be continually negotiated and defended.

A New Domain in Indian Children's Literature

The most important contribution of *Dear Mrs. Naidu* lies in its exploration of a thematic territory that has received comparatively limited attention within Indian children's literature: the intersection of children's rights, democratic citizenship and grassroots activism.

Traditional Indian children's texts have often focused on mythology, adventure, morality, environmental awareness, family relationships, or national identity. While these themes remain valuable, they generally position children as learners rather than political actors. Subramanian's novel introduces a markedly different paradigm.

The narrative is organized around questions usually associated with legal, social and political discourse: educational rights, institutional accountability, civic participation and collective action. These concerns are not simplified for young readers but translated into accessible narrative forms. As a result, the novel treats children as capable of engaging with complex social realities.

This shift reflects broader developments within global childhood studies, which increasingly recognize children as social agents rather than passive dependents. By incorporating these insights into a specifically Indian context, Subramanian contributes to the emergence of what may be termed a rights-based children's literature. Equally significant is the text's refusal to separate personal experience from structural critique. Sarojini's story remains emotionally engaging, yet it simultaneously directs attention toward larger questions of social justice. The novel thus demonstrates that children's literature can address serious political issues without sacrificing narrative accessibility.

The integration of gender, class, citizenship and activism distinguishes *Dear Mrs. Naidu* from earlier traditions and signals new possibilities for the genre. Rather than teaching

children how to adapt to society, the novel encourages them to imagine how society itself might be transformed.

Conclusion

Mathangi Subramanian's *Dear Mrs. Naidu* represents a landmark contribution to contemporary Indian children's literature. Through its portrayal of Sarojini's struggle for educational access and social recognition, the novel redefines childhood as a site of political agency rather than passive dependency. Drawing upon the intertwined frameworks of gender, class, citizenship, and representation, the text foregrounds the experiences of marginalized children while challenging conventional assumptions about their capacities. The novel's most significant achievement lies in its articulation of a rights-based vision of childhood. Sarojini emerges not as an object of charity but as a democratic subject capable of critical reflection, collective action and civic participation. Her letters transform private experiences into public interventions, creating a powerful narrative of voice and visibility. By centering the perspectives of poor urban children, particularly girls, Subramanian expands the thematic horizons of Indian children's literature. The text moves beyond moral instruction and individual development to engage questions of social justice, educational equity and democratic accountability. In doing so, it opens a new domain within the field—one in which children are recognized not merely as future citizens but as active participants in shaping the present. *Dear Mrs. Naidu* therefore stands as an important literary and political text, demonstrating the capacity of children's literature to interrogate structures of inequality while nurturing visions of a more inclusive and equitable society.

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