

THIRD EYE EDITION

Little Miss Sunshine



Today's self-imposed theme, on hindsight, appears to be a choice for which I am woefully unprepared. Girls. What do you say about them that will transcend the cliché of "sugar and spice and all things nice"? The speed bumps showed up almost at once. Hampered by the absence of sisters and daughters in my life, the only frame of reference seems to be my own girlhood, which, I wryly admit, took place a really long time ago. But this piece is not at all about my girlhood. It goes way beyond that to explore what images that little word "girl" evokes and how it touches on so many of our deepest emotions.

Last winter, I was at Fancy Bazar for a bit of shopping. It was a bitterly cold evening and all cars had their windows rolled up. Some people were making bonfires by the pavement, spreading out their hands close to the flames. Just then, I felt a small tug on the sleeve of my coat. A little girl with a sweet, heart-shaped face and a painfully skinny frame looked up hopefully at me. She was dressed in a light, short frilly frock, her hair tied in braids. And no, she was not there to beg. She pointed to a corridor through two shops, her little face anxious and smiling. She hopped and skipped ahead of me. Inside, in a rather modest little shop, her father, a harried-looking portly, middle-aged man, was selling woollen stoles. Enormous bundles of stoles were all around him, begging to be taken. I didn't particularly fancy any, the man was too polite to wheedle and that would have been that. But the little girl hovered next to me, the pools of her dark, hopeful eyes, framed by exquisite eyelashes, looking up pleadingly at me. I could sense how much it mattered to her, this little victory on

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behalf of her father, her family, this exchange of a small amount of money. As I picked up a stole almost at random, and made the transaction, gosh! How her smile lit up that shop!

I wonder why the little boy has been so much more immortalised in fiction than his female counterpart. You have Kipling's Kim, Dicken's Pip, Twain's Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, but can you rattle off the names of memorable girl characters in fiction? There are a lot of them in English nursery rhymes, though, and they reveal prejudices that exist in regard to the girl child across many cultures even today. Take the case of Jack and Jill. It seems nothing more than a pair of kids having a little accident when they go to fetch water. It is Jack who falls first, breaking his crown. But what happens after that is the crux of the problem. If Jack has fallen, Jill must fall too. It is as if her fate is inexorably bound to that of the male. It is unthinkable that she should not slip, remain unhurt and standing while Jack is being the clumsy fool. It is unacceptable that she may be smarter than Jack, have quicker reflexes and better survival skills. The girl in rhymes is sadly too often a skittish, helpless, lily-livered creature who is terrorised by a mere spider and loses her sheep. This victimhood of the girl extends to so many fairy tales that it is not a coincidence any more. Cinderella is the domestic drudge abused by three malicious female relatives, Sleeping Beauty would have been comatose forever if the prince had not resuscitated her. Snow White's beauty is her biggest foe. Red Riding Hood cannot be safe walking through the woods. The character of the Assamese fairytale, Tejimola, tortured to death by a jealous stepmother, was the stuff of many childhood nightmares. More than the woman's sadism, what was so unsettling was Tejimola's abject helplessness, her meek surrender to her fate. I feel it sent the wrong message to generations of little girls in this corner of the world. But, as an inspiring counterpoint is the story of the feisty daughter who tells her father, the king, that she lives on the strength of her own merit. After the enraged patriarch banishes her, she, with admirable resourcefulness, helps her poor husband to prosper, and proves herself. This sounds far more empowering than a government campaign of nice pictures and misleading statistics.

At the heart of one of America's most famous anti-racist protests is a little African-American girl. Ruby Bridges was jeered and taunted as she tried to attend classes in a New Orleans school in 1960 as part of a plan for integrated schooling. So strong was the rage of the white mob heckling her and pelting her with tomatoes that she had to be escorted out of school by four US Marshals. Artist Norman Rockwell painted that little girl in pigtails and a starched dress, looking scared and so dignified at the same time, and titled it *"The Problem We Live With"*. Today, there may be a Barack Obama in office, but that little girl continues to remind us what a long and heartbreaking journey it has been.

It was Renoir who believed that art should be pretty, to counteract the presence of so many ugly things in the world. And as a natural corollary to this premise, he created exquisite paintings of young girls. Sometimes it is the blonde girl in a blooming garden with a watering can in hand, or a pugnacious looking dark haired, white frocked imp brandishing a whip. All these are girls born to wealth and privilege. There is nothing in their depiction to suggest the invisible lines that will define the boundaries of their lives. Rather, there is a soothing

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sense of ease, security and absorption with life's pleasurable pursuits. But real life is different, splashed with dark hues and tinged with tragedy. The lives of two girls in two countries encapsulate the sufferings of people caught in a terrible moment in history. One is Anastasia, the youngest daughter of Tsar Nicholas II of Russia, who is believed to have been murdered with her parents and siblings on July 17, 1918 by the forces of the Bolshevik Secret Police. But rumours of her escape from that fate persisted till recently and several women have claimed to be this princess. Her life has spawned film and television features and intrigue people to this day. But more than Anastasia, it is Anne Frank who speaks from beyond the grave. This little Dutch girl's diary, written when she and her family hid for two years in the attic of an Amsterdam house, has in its heart a delicate world of human ties, desires, disappointment and elation. Through it we understand that in our minds we are always free – to imagine, to dream and make sense of a world that is often brutal and intimidating. Through it we see a family leading the semblance of an ordinary life, even as their final destiny at a concentration camp looms as a shadow over them.

There is so much that is left unsaid in mother-daughter relationships. In a daughter a mother sees her mirror reflection. And yet, she often wishes her little girl would follow a different path, aim for a star high above her own mundane realities. There is a tinge of envy of the girl's sheer youth and blossoming beauty. A mother's impulse is to warn her, protect her, set her limits. But it is only through this girl, her miniature self, that she will live her life again, and walk the paths she has not followed. This is beautifully conveyed by Sampurna Chatterji, a Bengali poet, in a poem where she wants to raise her daughter as a son. She dreams how her girl would be a composer of concrete dreams, and songs of towering glass. Her little genius would split the gene and run the world with a network of binary combinations. She will have long hair, radiant skin and good teeth. She will create a perfect home and a perfect family. But, in the end, the mother has lost. Her daughter, raised as a son, has become too strong, too fierce, too free. She has chopped her tresses and lengthened her arguments. She is often absent from home. It is almost as if the mother has created a Frankenstein which now terrifies her. Is it then wisest to leave little girls alone, to let them fashion doll weddings and slip into their mommies' high heels? Soon, all too soon, this bright spot of sunshine, this cloud of fairy dust, this little poem searching for words will be a thing of the past. A young woman will take her place, she will look back to that golden time when nothing was expected of her and her days were filled with girlish chatter and innocent play. In a couple of years, she is putting her children to sleep and picking up toys from the floor. As she is about to tip-toe out of the room, she returns and gazes at the little girl lost in sleep. The young mother smiles, but her eyes are pensive. Her girl must go where she has never gone before. And this is how it all begins, again and again, through the generations.....