

Voices Unbound: Feminine Resistance and Children’s Empowerment for a Sustainable World

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received: 30 Sep 2025; Received in revised form: 02 Nov 2025; Accepted: 06 Nov 2025; Available online: 10 Nov 2025</p> <p>©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords— gender identity, self-expression, sustainable development, feminist literary criticism, empowerment</p>	<p><i>This paper investigates the interconnections among gender identity, self-expression, and sustainable development through an exploration of K. R. Meera’s renowned Malayalam novel Sooryane Aninja Oru Sthree (The Woman Who Wore the Sun). Meera’s protagonist symbolizes the struggle of reclaiming a muted feminine voice, offering a broader reflection on empowerment and transformation. The study situates this literary narrative alongside modern educational frameworks that advocate for amplifying children’s voices and reinforcing teacher leadership to advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It argues that both women in literature and children in learning contexts experience transformative paths of self-realization, resistance, and empowerment – elements vital to achieving social sustainability. Drawing upon feminist literary criticism, postcolonial theory, and sustainability education, this paper demonstrates how literature can function as a pedagogical tool that nurtures empathy, justice, and responsible global citizenship.</i></p>

I. INTRODUCTION

Sustainability in the 21st century extends far beyond ecological awareness; it now encompasses ethical principles of equity, justice, and empowerment (Sachs, 2015; UNESCO, 2020). Movements such as *Children’s Voices for Global Sustainability* have emphasized the moral duty to include marginalized perspectives – whether those of women silenced by patriarchal traditions or of children constrained by adult-dominated systems. Within this context, women’s literature becomes a powerful space for reclaiming silenced voices and reimagining agency.

Among India’s most celebrated contemporary writers, K. R. Meera frequently positions her heroines at the delicate intersection of obedience and defiance. In *Sooryane Aninja Oru Sthree* (translated as *Jezebel*), Meera portrays a woman’s inner and spiritual journey toward autonomy and expression. Through rich

symbolism and psychological depth, she reveals how patriarchy breeds silence and how the act of speech becomes revolutionary (Krishnan, 2018). The protagonist’s pursuit of selfhood stands as an emblem of all marginalized individuals striving to be heard.

This paper connects Meera’s exploration of female transformation to the educational mission of empowering children and strengthening teacher leadership. It suggests that the narrative of voice and transformation in Meera’s work parallels the pedagogical pursuit of critical consciousness and sustainability-driven education.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Feminine Voice and Silence

Feminist scholars have long viewed “voice” as a signifier of agency and selfhood (Showalter, 1991;

Cixous, 1976). In patriarchal narratives, the absence or suppression of women's voices reflects their broader cultural marginalization. Across her works, K. R. Meera persistently confronts this reality, portraying women who question, resist, and redefine the structures of power. Krishnan (2018) observes that Meera "translates the silences of Indian womanhood into acts of speech and survival." In *Sooryane Aninja Oru Sthree*, the protagonist's transformation from submission to self-expression becomes a vivid representation of silence turned into strength.

2.2. Identity and Transformation

In Meera's fiction, identity emerges as both dynamic and contested. The protagonist constantly negotiates between socially imposed roles—daughter, wife, and woman—and her inner self. A postcolonial feminist lens (Spivak, 1988) reveals how identity is shaped by intersecting forces of gender and power. True transformation unfolds when the protagonist becomes conscious of her suppressed state and begins to reclaim her narrative. This evolution mirrors children's learning experiences, where self-awareness, empathy, and reflection enable personal growth and identity formation.

2.3. Sustainability and Education

Education for sustainability promotes justice, participation, and empowerment as key principles (Sterling, 2011; Bourn, 2016; UNESCO, 2020). Sterling (2011) argues that transformative learning helps individuals perceive themselves as active agents of change. When children are encouraged to voice their ideas, they cultivate critical and sustainable ways of thinking. In this sense, teachers play roles similar to Meera's narrators—facilitating the process of questioning, reimagining, and meaning-making within learners.

III. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS: K. R. MEERA'S SOORYANE ANINJA ORU STHREE

3.1. Amplifying Silenced Voices

The novel's central figure epitomizes the archetype of the silenced woman—confined by expectations yet yearning for liberation. Meera's poetic narrative reclaims this silence, reshaping it into a statement of resistance. When the protagonist reflects upon the unbearable brightness of the sun, Meera transforms light into a complex metaphor of truth and awakening

(Krishnan, 2018). Similarly, in education, teachers can empower children to transform passive learning into active engagement (Freire, 1970). In both contexts, amplifying marginalized voices becomes essential to inclusive and sustainable growth.

3.2. Empowerment Through Self-Expression

In Meera's literary world, speech itself becomes liberation. The protagonist's act of narrating her own story represents defiance against cultural erasure. As Bindu (2017) notes, Meera's women "speak not to be heard but to exist." This notion aligns closely with educational philosophies that emphasize authenticity in learning (Bourn, 2016). Just as Meera's heroine asserts her truth, classrooms too must foster spaces where children articulate ideas freely, without fear or hierarchy. Through such expression, learners develop creativity, empathy, and self-confidence—qualities essential to sustainable citizenship (UNESCO, 2020).

3.3. Teacher Leadership and Critical Pedagogy

Teachers, as facilitators of transformation, parallel Meera's narrative voice. Their task is not to dictate truth but to guide learners toward awareness through dialogue and reflection. Freire's (1970) concept of *conscientização*—or critical consciousness—captures this transformative process. A teacher, like Meera's storyteller, assists learners in moving from silence to awareness. By adopting a critical pedagogical stance, educators can help students question inequality and imagine fairer futures. In doing so, teacher leadership becomes an act of social responsibility and empowerment (Lambert, 2016).

3.4. Sustainability as Justice

Social and gender justice serve as the moral compass of Meera's fiction. Her critique of patriarchal norms resonates strongly with the social dimension of sustainability (Sachs, 2015). Sachs reminds us that sustainability without equality is impossible. Both the empowerment of women in Meera's stories and of children in classrooms represent steps toward social sustainability. When individuals gain the courage to speak and act, they contribute to more equitable, resilient communities (Bourn, 2016; UNESCO, 2020).

3.5. Identity and Transformation

The protagonist's metamorphosis from compliance to self-realization echoes the process of transformative learning (Sterling, 2011). Her evolving identity

parallels the developmental journey of learners who must question, unlearn, and reconstruct their understanding of the world. In both cases, transformation is not merely intellectual—it is moral, emotional, and spiritual. Literature, therefore, becomes a pedagogical mirror through which identity formation can be examined and nurtured.

IV. EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Literature as a Pedagogical Tool

Teaching works like Meera's enables educators to explore gender, power, and sustainability through the lens of empathy and narrative understanding (Krishnan, 2018). Students gain opportunities to reflect on how silenced voices reclaim agency and how these struggles mirror real-world social issues. Integrating feminist and sustainability themes into literature classrooms can deepen students' awareness of justice, equality, and global citizenship (UNESCO, 2020).

4.2 Empowering Children's Voices

Children's narratives deserve the same validation as adult perspectives. Creating classrooms that value dialogue, storytelling, and creativity fosters empowerment and self-expression (Freire, 1970). Activities such as reflective journals, dramatizations, or story circles allow learners to articulate personal experiences, promoting ethical and empathetic reflection (Bourn, 2016). When students are encouraged to "speak their truth," they learn to think critically about social realities.

4.3 Teacher as Change Agent

Within the framework of sustainability education, the teacher's role transcends instruction—it becomes leadership through empathy and justice. Drawing upon Meera's vision of self-discovery and resistance, educators can cultivate learning environments rooted in questioning and inclusivity. Lambert (2016) emphasizes that teacher leadership thrives on collaboration and shared purpose, enabling learners to engage collectively in change-making processes.

4.4 Linking Literature and Sustainable Development Goals

Meera's fiction resonates with SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality), demonstrating how storytelling fosters

transformative awareness (UNESCO, 2020). Including such literary texts in teacher education programs bridges the humanities and sustainability studies, offering a holistic model of how education can cultivate socially responsible citizens.

V. CONCLUSION

K. R. Meera's *Sooryane Aninja Oru Sthree* transcends regional boundaries to voice universal concerns of identity, justice, and transformation. Her portrayal of a woman reclaiming her silenced voice mirrors the educational imperative to empower children as active participants in their own learning. Both women and children—figures often marginalized within social hierarchies—seek recognition through speech, reflection, and action. These processes of self-expression lie at the core of sustainability. For educators, Meera's work reinforces the ethical duty to build classrooms where dialogue, empathy, and agency thrive. Literature, then, is not merely a reflection of society but a living instrument for change—a means of nurturing a sustainable world where every voice is acknowledged and every story contributes to the collective pursuit of justice and humanity.

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