

The Politics of Ordinary Childhood: Nandini Nayar and Contemporary Indian Children's Literature

Dr. Komal Vinayak Tujare

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, St. Mira's College for Girls, Pune, Maharashtra, India

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Received: 06 July 2026; Received in revised form: 01 Aug 2026; Accepted: 05 Aug 2026; Available online: 09 Aug 2026 Keywords— Contemporary Indian children's literature, Nandini Nayar, Childhood Studies, feminist ethics, everyday childhood ©2026 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/).	Contemporary Indian children's literature has increasingly moved away from overt moral instruction towards narratives that privilege the everyday experiences of children. While existing scholarship has examined questions of identity, nation, environmental awareness and gender representation, comparatively little attention has been paid to the ways in which ordinary domestic spaces become sites of ethical and social learning. This paper examines a selection of Nandini Nayar's children's books to argue that her fiction relocates questions of agency, care and social responsibility from extraordinary events to the routines of everyday childhood. Through narratives centred on friendship, family relationships, food, festivals and creative play, Nayar presents children not as passive recipients of adult knowledge but as active participants in shaping the moral worlds they inhabit. Drawing upon Childhood Studies and feminist ethics, the paper analyses how Nayar's narratives challenge conventional pedagogical hierarchies by positioning children as observers, interpreters and, at times, educators of adults. Rather than advancing an overt feminist agenda, her stories normalise equitable relationships through collaborative domestic practices, shared decision-making and the rejection of rigid gender roles. Boys participate in activities traditionally associated with care while girls exercise creativity, initiative and ethical judgement without being framed as exceptional or rebellious figures. In doing so, the narratives replace prescriptive moral lessons with forms of learning grounded in dialogue, empathy and lived experience. The paper further argues that the politics of Nayar's fiction lies precisely in its apparent ordinariness. Kitchens, classrooms, neighbourhoods and festivals emerge as spaces where values are negotiated and traditions are reimagined through children's imaginative engagement with the world around them. Such representations offer an alternative model of childhood that privileges participation over obedience and ethical reflection over didactic instruction. By locating social transformation within the everyday, Nandini Nayar's work contributes significantly to the evolving landscape of contemporary Indian children's literature and expands current understandings of feminist practice in writing for young readers.

Introduction

Children's literature has long occupied an uneasy position within literary studies. Often regarded as a

vehicle for instruction rather than serious artistic expression, it has historically been evaluated in terms of its usefulness in shaping children's behaviour and

moral character. Recent scholarship, however, has challenged this assumption by demonstrating that literature written for young readers does far more than communicate ethical lessons. Children's texts participate in wider cultural debates concerning identity, citizenship, gender, family and power. As Jacqueline Rose famously observes, "children's fiction sets up the child as an outsider to its own process, and then aims, unashamedly, to take the child in" (Rose 2). Rose's argument foregrounds the fact that children's literature is always mediated by adult assumptions about childhood. It therefore offers valuable insight into the cultural values a society seeks to reproduce, negotiate or contest.

Within the Indian context, children's literature has undergone significant transformation over the past three decades. Earlier works often privileged overt moral instruction, nationalist ideals and simplified binaries between right and wrong. Such narratives reflected broader educational concerns in post-independence India where children's books frequently functioned as instruments of character formation. More recent publishing initiatives, particularly those associated with independent publishers such as Tulika Books, Pratham Books and Karadi Tales, have gradually expanded both the thematic and aesthetic possibilities of writing for young readers. Questions of diversity, disability, environmental awareness, multilingualism and gender have assumed increasing importance. At the same time, contemporary authors have begun to move away from explicitly didactic storytelling towards narratives that privilege the ordinary experiences of childhood.

Among the writers contributing to this shift is Nandini Nayar, whose work consistently centres the everyday worlds inhabited by children. Rather than constructing dramatic adventures or overtly moral narratives, her stories unfold through familiar domestic routines, school friendships, festivals, shared meals and imaginative play. These apparently ordinary settings become spaces in which children negotiate relationships, develop ethical judgement and engage creatively with the social world around them. Such an approach distinguishes Nayar's fiction from earlier traditions of children's writing that frequently relied upon adult authority or exemplary protagonists to communicate moral values. Instead,

ethical understanding emerges through observation, conversation and collaborative experience.

Despite Nayar's growing reputation as a significant writer of children's fiction, critical engagement with her work remains limited. Existing scholarship on contemporary Indian children's literature has largely concentrated on questions of multicultural representation, gender stereotypes, nationalism or environmental education. While these concerns have generated important discussions, relatively little attention has been paid to the ways in which contemporary texts construct childhood itself as a space of ethical agency. In particular, there remains insufficient examination of how domestic life, friendship and everyday routines function as sites where children actively participate in the production of knowledge rather than merely receiving instruction from adults.

This paper seeks to address that gap by examining a selection of Nandini Nayar's children's books through the intersecting frameworks of Childhood Studies and feminist ethics. Developments within the sociology of childhood have fundamentally altered the understanding of children as social actors. Allison James and Alan Prout argue that childhood should be understood not as a universal biological stage but as "a social construction" that varies historically and culturally (James and Prout 7). Similarly, Marah Gubar challenges developmental models that position children as incomplete adults, proposing instead a "kinship model" in which children and adults participate in shared forms of understanding while remaining distinct from one another (Gubar 458). These theoretical perspectives provide a productive framework for reading Nayar's fiction, where children repeatedly demonstrate competence, creativity and moral reasoning without being represented as miniature adults.

The paper also draws upon feminist ethics, particularly the work of Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings, to examine how care, empathy and relationships operate within Nayar's narratives. Gilligan argues that moral development cannot be understood solely through abstract principles of justice because ethical decisions are equally shaped by relationships and responsibilities of care (Gilligan 19). Noddings similarly locates ethical life within practices of attentiveness, reciprocity and human connection

rather than detached moral rules (Noddings 14). These ideas illuminate the ethical structure of Nayar's fiction, where cooperation, listening and shared responsibility consistently replace authoritarian forms of instruction. Importantly, such values are not presented as exclusively feminine virtues but emerge as the foundation of democratic relationships within families, classrooms and neighbourhood communities.

This paper argues that Nandini Nayar reimagines childhood as a site of ethical agency by locating social transformation within the ordinary spaces of everyday life. Rather than relying upon overt moral instruction or exceptional acts of heroism, her fiction constructs ethical and feminist values through domestic participation, friendship, creative labour and collaborative learning. Kitchens, classrooms and festivals become spaces where authority is negotiated rather than imposed, allowing children to shape the moral worlds they inhabit alongside adults. In doing so, Nayar offers an alternative vision of contemporary Indian childhood that privileges participation over obedience, dialogue over instruction and shared responsibility over hierarchical authority. Her work therefore contributes significantly to the evolving landscape of Indian children's literature by demonstrating that the politics of childhood often resides not in extraordinary acts of resistance but in the quiet transformations of everyday life.

Contemporary Indian Children's Literature and the Politics of Everyday Childhood: A Review of Scholarship

Children's literature has increasingly become an important area of literary and cultural inquiry, particularly since the emergence of Childhood Studies in the late twentieth century. Earlier criticism frequently regarded literature for children as a secondary literary form whose primary purpose was moral instruction. More recent scholarship, however, has challenged this assumption by demonstrating that children's literature is deeply implicated in the production of social, political and cultural meanings. Peter Hunt argues that children's books "are inevitably didactic because they are written for children by adults" (Hunt 4). The significance of children's literature therefore lies not merely in the stories it tells but in the assumptions it makes about

childhood, authority and the relationship between young readers and the adult world.

Much of the foundational scholarship on children's literature has concentrated on exposing the ideological work performed by texts written for young readers. Jacqueline Rose's influential study *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* contends that children's literature is shaped by adult desires to construct and regulate childhood rather than simply represent it (Rose 1-2). Perry Nodelman similarly argues that children's fiction communicates cultural values through narrative structures that often remain invisible to readers. He observes that children's books "teach children how to think about the world" by presenting particular understandings of normality, behaviour and social relationships (Nodelman 157). Such arguments have encouraged scholars to read children's literature as a cultural discourse rather than a purely pedagogical genre.

The emergence of Childhood Studies further complicated earlier understandings of children as passive recipients of adult knowledge. Allison James and Alan Prout argue that childhood is "a social construction" rather than a universal biological category, emphasising that children's experiences are shaped by historical, social and cultural conditions (James and Prout 7). This shift redirected scholarly attention from what adults teach children to the ways children themselves participate in creating meaning. Marah Gubar extends this argument by rejecting models that define children through lack or incompleteness. Instead, she proposes a "kinship model" that recognises children and adults as sharing many capacities while remaining different in experience and perspective (Gubar 458). Such theoretical developments have profoundly influenced recent readings of children's literature by foregrounding children's agency rather than their dependence.

These developments have also shaped scholarship on Indian children's literature. Earlier histories of the field frequently identified nationalist education and moral instruction as dominant concerns during the colonial and immediate post-independence periods. Stories often celebrated exemplary children whose courage, honesty and obedience were presented as ideals for young readers. While such narratives undoubtedly served important educational purposes,

they also reflected broader cultural expectations that positioned childhood as preparation for responsible citizenship.

The landscape of Indian children's publishing has altered considerably since the 1990s. Independent publishers such as Tulika Books, Pratham Books and Karadi Tales have introduced texts that foreground linguistic diversity, regional cultures, disability, environmental awareness and questions of gender without relying upon overt moral instruction. Scholars have observed that these publishers have expanded both the thematic range and aesthetic possibilities of Indian children's literature by privileging everyday experience over grand narratives of heroism or national identity. Rather than presenting children as passive learners, many contemporary texts depict them as curious observers, imaginative thinkers and active participants in family and community life.

Within feminist criticism, discussions of children's literature have frequently centred upon representation. Earlier studies often examined the persistence of gender stereotypes in stories, particularly the association of girls with domesticity and boys with adventure, independence and public life. While such critiques remain important, more recent feminist scholarship has increasingly questioned whether the presence of empowered female protagonists alone is sufficient to describe a text as feminist. Roberta Seelinger Trites argues that children's literature should be understood in relation to the power structures it reproduces or challenges rather than simply the gender of its central characters (Trites 19). This perspective encourages critics to examine how authority operates within narratives and how relationships between adults and children are negotiated.

Equally significant has been the growing influence of feminist ethics upon literary criticism. Carol Gilligan's critique of universal models of moral development demonstrated that ethical judgement frequently emerges through relationships of care rather than abstract principles of justice (Gilligan 19). Nel Noddings similarly argues that ethical life begins in attentiveness, reciprocity and human relationships rather than rigid moral codes (Noddings 14). Although these theorists do not write specifically about children's literature, their work offers

productive ways of understanding texts in which cooperation, empathy and shared responsibility become central ethical values.

Despite these important developments, scholarship on contemporary Indian children's literature continues to privilege a relatively small number of recurring concerns. Questions of nationalism, multiculturalism, environmental education, language politics and gender representation have received considerable attention. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to the ordinary spaces through which children's everyday lives unfold. Kitchens, classrooms, neighbourhoods, festivals and routines often function merely as settings within existing criticism rather than as sites where ethical identities are actively negotiated.

The limited scholarship available on Nandini Nayar reflects a similar pattern. Although her books are widely read in schools and published by leading children's publishers, they have attracted relatively little sustained academic analysis. Existing discussions generally describe her work in terms of accessibility, child-centred narration or educational value. Such observations are useful but remain largely descriptive. They do not sufficiently examine the ideological significance of her narratives or the ways in which they reconceptualise childhood itself.

The present study addresses this gap by reading Nandini Nayar's fiction through the combined perspectives of Childhood Studies and feminist ethics. Rather than treating domestic life as a neutral background, it argues that the everyday constitutes the primary arena in which ethical understanding is formed. Cooking, friendship, festivals, creative play and family conversations become practices through which children negotiate authority, reshape traditions and participate in the production of knowledge. In shifting attention from extraordinary events to ordinary experience, Nandini Nayar offers a distinctive contribution to contemporary Indian children's literature that has not yet received adequate scholarly attention. The following section therefore establishes the theoretical framework through which these recurring patterns may be understood.

The Politics of the Ordinary: Domestic Space as Ethical Space

One of the most distinctive features of Nandini Nayar's children's fiction is her sustained attention to the ordinary rhythms of everyday life. Unlike conventional children's narratives that rely on adventure, fantasy or dramatic conflict to communicate moral values, Nayar locates ethical growth within familiar domestic spaces. Homes, kitchens, classrooms, neighbourhoods and festivals are not merely settings through which the narrative unfolds; they become sites where children learn to negotiate relationships, exercise creativity and participate in the moral life of the family and community. In doing so, her stories suggest that ethical development emerges not through explicit instruction but through participation in everyday practices.

Across the books examined in this study, domestic space functions as an active environment of learning rather than a background to childhood. Parents do not appear as unquestionable authorities who transmit moral truths to passive children. Instead, they engage in conversations, answer questions and frequently learn alongside their children. This collaborative model of family life represents a significant departure from the didactic tradition that has long characterised children's literature in India. Moral understanding is presented as something that develops through interaction, observation and shared experience rather than through rules imposed from above.

Food occupies a particularly important place in Nayar's narratives. Meals, cooking and eating become occasions for dialogue, experimentation and collective participation. In *What Should I Make*, the simple act of making chapatis is transformed into an imaginative activity through which the child participates in household work. Rather than treating cooking as routine domestic labour, the narrative presents it as an opportunity for creativity and learning. The child's curiosity is encouraged, mistakes are accepted as part of the process and the kitchen becomes a space where knowledge is shared rather than controlled. Importantly, the story does not present domestic work as the exclusive responsibility of women. The participation of a young boy in cooking quietly unsettles conventional assumptions about gendered labour without announcing itself as a lesson in equality. Equality is normalised through practice rather than articulated as ideology.

This emphasis on participation rather than instruction recurs in *Mini's Friend*. Much of the narrative revolves around ordinary family conversations concerning school, festivals, clothing and food. Mini repeatedly introduces new ideas that she has learnt from her friend Anika, prompting curiosity as well as amusement among the adults in her family. Initially, these suggestions appear to be simple instances of childhood imitation. However, the narrative gradually reveals that imitation develops into independent creativity. Inspired by conversations about Diwali celebrations, Mini invents the idea of the "sparkler diya", a decorative lamp that captures the beauty of fireworks without producing noise or pollution. Later she develops the "Sweet Red Dhadam", a sweet shaped like a firecracker that preserves the excitement of the festival while eliminating its harmful effects. These inventions emerge not from adult instruction but from the child's own imaginative engagement with her surroundings.

The significance of these episodes lies in the way they transform tradition from within rather than rejecting it altogether. Contemporary children's literature frequently addresses environmental concerns by presenting clear moral oppositions between responsible and irresponsible behaviour. Nayar adopts a more nuanced approach. Mini does not condemn Diwali or dismiss the pleasures associated with the festival. Instead, she seeks creative alternatives that retain celebration while reducing environmental harm. The sparkler diya recreates the visual pleasure of fireworks through art and craft, while the Sweet Red Dhadam preserves the excitement of crackers through food. Festivals therefore become sites of innovation where children negotiate inherited cultural practices in response to contemporary concerns.

The domestic environment also functions as a space in which authority becomes increasingly shared. Throughout *Mini's Friend*, Amma, Baba and Manoj often question Mini about Anika's ideas with gentle humour. Their curiosity gradually replaces scepticism as they recognise the value of Mini's observations. By the end of the story, it is not only Mini who has changed. The entire family participates in painting sparkler diyas and preparing the newly invented sweets, demonstrating that the child's imagination has reshaped family traditions. Ethical influence thus

moves in multiple directions rather than flowing exclusively from adults to children. Nayar presents learning as reciprocal, suggesting that families are communities in which all members contribute to shared knowledge.

The school occupies a similarly important position within these narratives. Teachers are portrayed less as disciplinary figures than as facilitators who encourage children's creativity. In *Mini's Friend*, Ritu Miss welcomes Mini's suggestion for a new Diwali sweet and develops it collaboratively with the class. The classroom becomes an extension of the home where learning takes place through participation rather than memorisation. Such representations challenge rigid distinctions between formal education and everyday experience. The child's imagination is not confined to play but is recognised as a legitimate source of knowledge capable of enriching both school and family life.

Another notable aspect of Nayar's fiction is its treatment of material culture. Objects such as chapatis, diyas, lanterns, sweets, school supplies and clothing acquire symbolic importance because they mediate relationships between people. They are not merely decorative details that create realism. Instead, they function as everyday artefacts through which values are negotiated. Mini's desire for a glittering red skirt, for example, initially appears to reflect childhood imitation. Yet the narrative eventually demonstrates that her choices are inseparable from friendship, identity and participation in shared celebrations. Similarly, the handcrafted sparkler diyas become symbols of collaborative creativity rather than simple festival decorations.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Nandini Nayar's domestic worlds is the absence of overt moralising. Parents seldom deliver lengthy lectures and children are rarely rewarded or punished in conventional ways. Ethical understanding develops gradually through conversation, experimentation and reflection. Conflicts are resolved through cooperation rather than authority, and mistakes become opportunities for learning rather than occasions for discipline. This narrative strategy respects the intellectual capacities of young readers by allowing them to infer values from situations rather than receiving predetermined conclusions.

By locating ethical development within ordinary domestic life, Nayar expands the possibilities of contemporary Indian children's literature. The home is represented not as a private sphere isolated from wider social concerns but as the place where larger questions of environmental responsibility, gender, creativity and community are first encountered and negotiated. Everyday activities such as cooking, making crafts, celebrating festivals or sharing meals acquire political significance because they shape children's understanding of relationships and responsibility. The ordinary therefore becomes a site of quiet but meaningful transformation.

Taken together, these narratives suggest that meaningful social change begins with everyday practices rather than extraordinary acts of heroism. Nandini Nayar's fiction invites young readers to recognise that ethical responsibility is embedded within the seemingly ordinary routines of daily life. Through shared work, creative imagination and reciprocal learning, her stories redefine domestic space as a dynamic arena where children actively participate in shaping both family life and the wider social world.

Children's Agency and the Reversal of Pedagogical Authority

One of the defining characteristics of Nandini Nayar's children's fiction is its rejection of the conventional hierarchy that places adults as unquestioned sources of knowledge and children as passive recipients of instruction. While many traditional works of children's literature rely upon adult authority to communicate moral lessons, Nayar consistently imagines childhood as a space of intellectual competence and ethical participation. Her child protagonists are observant, reflective and capable of influencing the people around them. Rather than positioning adults as teachers and children as learners, her narratives construct learning as a reciprocal process in which knowledge moves in multiple directions. This reversal of pedagogical authority forms one of the most significant contributions of her work to contemporary Indian children's literature.

Historically, children's literature has been closely associated with education and discipline. Stories frequently conclude with explicit moral lessons, while

adult characters guide children towards socially acceptable behaviour. Such narratives reinforce a hierarchical understanding of childhood in which adults possess knowledge and experience while children gradually acquire both through obedience and instruction. Nandini Nayar departs from this tradition by refusing to present children merely as individuals who must be corrected or guided. Instead, she depicts them as active participants in interpreting the world around them. Her protagonists ask questions, notice inconsistencies, imagine alternatives and frequently reshape the perspectives of the adults with whom they interact.

The agency exercised by Nayar's child characters is neither rebellious nor confrontational. Unlike many contemporary narratives that celebrate childhood independence through conflict with adults, Nayar imagines agency as collaborative and relational. Children influence others not by rejecting authority but by participating confidently in conversations and shared experiences. Their observations encourage adults to reconsider familiar assumptions, making learning a collective rather than unilateral activity. This subtle redistribution of authority distinguishes her fiction from both traditional didactic narratives and more overtly oppositional representations of childhood.

Mini's Friend provides one of the clearest examples of this pedagogical reversal. Throughout the narrative, Mini returns home with stories about her friend Anika. These stories initially appear to be ordinary accounts of school life, yet they gradually become catalysts for discussion within the family. Amma, Baba and Manoj repeatedly ask Mini to explain Anika's ideas, customs and imaginative suggestions. Their questions reveal genuine curiosity rather than condescension. The adults do not dismiss Mini's observations as childish fantasy. Instead, they recognise that her experiences provide access to perspectives unavailable to them. Mini thus becomes a mediator between different ways of understanding the world.

Significantly, the narrative does not portray this transformation as dramatic or revolutionary. Authority shifts gradually through everyday conversation. Mini's explanations alter the family's attitudes not because she possesses exceptional wisdom but because her observations are treated with

seriousness and respect. This representation challenges the assumption that childhood is defined primarily by dependence. Instead, knowledge is shown to emerge through attentive listening irrespective of age.

The Diwali episodes illustrate this process particularly well. Mini's proposal for environmentally friendly celebrations is initially inspired by Anika's ideas, yet she soon develops these suggestions through her own imagination. Her inventions are neither ignored nor corrected by adults. Rather, they become the basis for new family traditions. The sparkler diya and the Sweet Red Dhadam are eventually embraced by both family members and teachers, demonstrating that children's creativity can reshape established cultural practices. Learning therefore flows from child to adult as readily as from adult to child.

This movement of knowledge also transforms the role of parents within the narrative. Amma and Baba remain caring and responsible figures, yet they are not represented as infallible authorities. They frequently admit uncertainty, ask questions and participate alongside Mini in creative activities. Their willingness to learn reflects a model of parenting based upon dialogue rather than command. The family consequently becomes a community of learners in which authority is distributed rather than concentrated.

The significance of this representation extends beyond family relationships. Nayar repeatedly portrays educational spaces as environments that encourage participation rather than obedience. Teachers acknowledge children's ideas and often incorporate them into classroom activities. Rather than evaluating children solely through correct answers or disciplined behaviour, schools become places where curiosity and imagination receive equal importance. This portrayal contrasts with more conventional depictions of classrooms as spaces governed by rigid authority and fixed knowledge.

Such narratives also redefine the meaning of competence in childhood. Nayar's protagonists are not celebrated because they possess extraordinary intelligence or exceptional talents. Their competence lies instead in their capacity to observe carefully, empathise with others and think creatively about ordinary situations. They solve problems through

conversation rather than competition and through cooperation rather than individual achievement. This emphasis on everyday competence broadens conventional definitions of intelligence by recognising emotional understanding, creativity and ethical judgement as equally valuable forms of knowledge.

Friendship plays an essential role in this process of learning. In Nayar's fiction, friends do more than provide companionship; they introduce children to unfamiliar experiences, encourage curiosity and expand moral imagination. Mini's relationship with Anika exemplifies this dynamic. Through their friendship, Mini encounters different cultural practices and new ways of celebrating familiar festivals. Rather than simply imitating her friend, she interprets these experiences creatively and adapts them to her own context. Friendship therefore becomes a pedagogical relationship in which children educate one another through shared experience.

The reciprocal nature of learning also challenges conventional assumptions about generational difference. Adults and children are not depicted as occupying entirely separate worlds. Instead, they share common spaces, responsibilities and conversations. Differences in age remain important, yet they do not determine who possesses knowledge or authority. This more democratic vision of family life reflects broader changes in contemporary understandings of childhood, where children are increasingly recognised as social participants capable of contributing meaningfully to collective decision-making.

Another striking aspect of Nayar's work is the absence of punishment as the primary mechanism of moral education. Children are seldom corrected through discipline or fear. When misunderstandings arise, they are resolved through discussion and reflection. Adults encourage explanation rather than unquestioning obedience, allowing children to develop confidence in their own judgement. This narrative strategy places considerable trust in children's ability to reason ethically and arrive at responsible decisions through experience.

Importantly, the agency represented in these stories remains grounded within ordinary life. Nayar's protagonists do not transform society through spectacular acts of heroism. Their influence emerges

through small acts of creativity, kindness and thoughtful participation. They suggest alternatives, ask unexpected questions and encourage adults to reconsider established routines. These apparently modest interventions accumulate to produce meaningful changes within families, classrooms and neighbourhoods. Agency therefore becomes a practice embedded within everyday relationships rather than an exceptional quality possessed by extraordinary children.

This understanding of childhood has significant implications for contemporary Indian children's literature. By repositioning children as contributors rather than recipients of knowledge, Nayar challenges long-standing assumptions about education, authority and moral development. Her fiction suggests that ethical understanding cannot be reduced to lessons delivered by adults. Instead, it emerges through dialogue, collaboration and shared experience. Such an approach acknowledges children's capacity for independent thought while preserving the importance of intergenerational relationships.

Ultimately, Nandini Nayar's stories propose a more democratic model of childhood. Adults continue to provide care, guidance and emotional security, yet they also recognise the value of children's observations and creativity. Children, in turn, participate actively in shaping family traditions, educational practices and everyday ethical decisions. The result is a narrative world in which authority is continually negotiated rather than simply inherited. Through this subtle but significant reversal of pedagogical hierarchy, Nayar reimagines childhood not as preparation for citizenship but as an active and meaningful form of citizenship in itself. Her fiction therefore challenges readers to reconsider who teaches whom and to recognise that learning is most transformative when it is shared across generations.

Quiet Feminism: Care, Creativity and Everyday Resistance

The feminist dimension of Nandini Nayar's children's fiction lies not in overt political declarations or exceptional female protagonists but in its quiet reconfiguration of everyday relationships. Rather than foregrounding resistance through confrontation, her stories normalise equality by presenting care,

creativity and collaboration as shared human values. This subtle approach distinguishes her work from narratives that explicitly seek to challenge patriarchal structures. Instead, Nayar dismantles gender stereotypes by rendering them increasingly irrelevant within the everyday lives of her characters.

Domestic spaces, often regarded as sites where traditional gender roles are reproduced, become spaces of shared participation in Nayar's fiction. Household activities such as cooking, preparing festival decorations and caring for others are represented as collective practices rather than exclusively feminine responsibilities. In *What Should I Make*, the act of preparing chapatis becomes an imaginative exercise in which a young boy participates with enthusiasm. The narrative neither celebrates nor explains this participation as unusual. By presenting domestic work as creative and gender-neutral, the story quietly questions assumptions that have historically associated care work with women.

Similarly, girls in Nayar's fiction possess agency without being represented as extraordinary or rebellious. Mini's confidence emerges through curiosity, empathy and creative thinking rather than through rejection of authority. Her environmentally conscious innovations during Diwali illustrate this approach. Instead of condemning cultural traditions, she imaginatively reshapes them, suggesting alternatives that preserve celebration while promoting responsibility. Such acts demonstrate that meaningful social change often begins with small interventions within familiar spaces rather than dramatic acts of resistance.

Another important aspect of Nayar's feminist vision is the emphasis on relationships rather than individual achievement. Success is rarely measured through competition or personal ambition. Instead, fulfilment arises from cooperation, friendship and mutual respect. Children solve problems collectively, parents remain open to learning from their children and teachers encourage participation instead of unquestioning obedience. This relational ethic challenges hierarchical structures without dismantling the family itself. Authority is redistributed through dialogue and shared experience rather than replaced by conflict.

Nayar also avoids assigning emotional intelligence or caregiving exclusively to female characters. Boys participate in nurturing relationships and creative domestic activities without their masculinity being questioned, while girls demonstrate initiative and leadership without being portrayed as exceptional figures. Equality is therefore embedded within everyday interactions instead of being presented as an ideological lesson. This strategy allows young readers to encounter alternative gender relationships as ordinary aspects of daily life.

The politics of Nandini Nayar's fiction thus resides in its refusal to sensationalise feminism. Her narratives neither reject tradition nor romanticise it. Instead, they encourage children to engage critically with inherited practices through imagination, empathy and participation. In doing so, they offer a model of feminist practice grounded in care, creativity and shared responsibility. Such an approach broadens the understanding of feminist children's literature by demonstrating that resistance can emerge through ordinary acts of collaboration as effectively as through overt political protest.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that Nandini Nayar's children's fiction represents a significant contribution to contemporary Indian children's literature by relocating ethical and social transformation to the ordinary spaces of childhood. Rather than relying upon overt moral instruction or heroic narratives, her stories construct ethical understanding through everyday experiences of family life, friendship, creativity and domestic participation. Kitchens, classrooms, neighbourhoods and festivals become sites where children negotiate relationships, question established assumptions and participate actively in shaping the moral worlds they inhabit.

A close reading of the selected texts demonstrates that Nayar departs from the didactic tradition that has historically influenced much children's writing. Instead of presenting adults as unquestioned authorities and children as passive learners, she imagines learning as a reciprocal process. Parents, teachers and children participate together in conversations, creative activities and shared decision-making. This redistribution of pedagogical authority

challenges conventional understandings of childhood as merely a preparatory stage for adulthood and instead recognises children as competent social actors capable of influencing both family and community.

The paper has also shown that the feminist politics of Nayar's fiction operates through subtle narrative strategies rather than explicit ideological statements. Domestic labour is presented as collaborative rather than gendered, girls exercise creativity and initiative without being framed as exceptional and boys participate naturally in practices of care. Such representations normalise equitable relationships instead of presenting them as extraordinary achievements. Consequently, the narratives replace confrontation with cooperation and instruction with dialogue, suggesting that lasting social change often begins through everyday interactions.

Equally significant is Nayar's treatment of ordinary domestic life as a meaningful political space. The home is not represented as separate from wider social concerns but as the place where environmental responsibility, gender equality, empathy and democratic participation are first experienced and negotiated. Through activities as simple as cooking, making festival decorations or sharing meals, children learn to imagine alternative ways of living together. These quiet transformations reveal that the politics of childhood need not be located in dramatic acts of resistance but may emerge through the cumulative effect of ordinary practices grounded in care and creativity.

Although scholarship on contemporary Indian children's literature has increasingly examined questions of identity, representation and environmental awareness, comparatively little attention has been paid to the ethical possibilities embedded within everyday domestic narratives. By foregrounding the ordinary as a site of agency and social participation, this study offers a different way of reading Nandini Nayar's fiction and contributes to broader discussions within Childhood Studies and feminist literary criticism. Her work demonstrates that children's literature continues to possess the capacity not merely to reflect society but to imagine more inclusive and democratic forms of social life. In doing so, Nandini Nayar redefines childhood as an active space of ethical engagement where learning,

creativity and care become the foundations of both personal growth and collective transformation.

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