

# Lapis Lazuli

## An International Literary Journal

ISSN 2249-4529

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THEMED SECTION: "WHO ARE WE KIDDING? A STUDY OF  
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY INDIAN ENGLISH CHILDREN'S  
LITERATURE"

VOL: 9, No.: 2, AUTUMN 2019

INTRODUCTION

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REFREED, INDEXED, BLIND PEER REVIEWED

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**WHO ARE WE KIDDING?****A STUDY OF TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY INDIAN ENGLISH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE**

Dr. Anurima Chanda

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Talking about an online reading group that she manages, Tanu Shree Singh writes (in an essay which has been included in this issue of *Lapis Lazuli*) how the space is populated with requests for recommendations of books that instill 'good values' in children and how at least one response will almost always end up referring to either Ruskin Bond, Enid Blyton or Roald Dahl. Till about even twenty years back, the idea and purpose of Indian English children's literature was far different from what it is today – and it is important to note that the keyword here is "Indian English" children's literature (not "Indian" children's literature as a whole). For most children growing up in the twentieth century, especially ones who had the means to regular education, reading was largely dominated by school texts. The rest was a mixture of books imported from the west, adult literature modified for children's reading, a vast range of children's magazines, weekly newspaper supplements dedicated to the youth and books published by foundations like National Book Trust and Children's Book Trust. This Indian English variety of children's literature was rather limited in its scope and objective because of various principles that governed its very foundation on the Indian soil (the regional counterpart was much more experimental in comparison). The readers, being at an impressionable stage of their lives, imbibed this version of childhood as their own definition of childhood and became agents for the same while rearing the next generation too. This is exactly what we see happening in Singh's online reading group, which she herself points out: "As parents, we end up looking at books as a tool for inculcating acceptable values. And as someone recommending, we look at books through the myopic vision of our own childhood." This is also what happened in response to the call for papers (CFP) for this issue of *Lapis Lazuli*. Despite the very clear mention of "Twenty-First Century Indian English Children's Literature" in the title itself (especially for many among us who do not read the actual body of the CFP), the majority portion of the submissions we got were on Lewis Carroll, Grimm's fairy tales, Disney movies, picture books from the west, so on and so forth. The purpose of this issue, together with one introductory essay and two papers, will therefore be to nudge this "myopic vision" of childhood that has become our reality and show that there are newer horizons to cross and newer heights to scale. This issue will try and point out how ideas of childhood have undergone drastic changes (and are still undergoing changes as we speak) in recent times, completely transforming the space of Indian English children's literature market, and hope that scholars and guardians allow themselves to be more experimental in their choices now. The attempt here will be not to enforce opinions but simply to spread awareness.

In India, the child was never seen as a separate category and hence children did not have any literature solely dedicated to them. The pre-colonial period was dominated by stories from the two epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata and their numerous adaptations. India also had a rich culture of oral tradition in the form of ancient lore, classical tales and folk tales, which were popular among the masses and had a special appeal for the children. With the coming of the British, the proselytising work undertaken by the missionaries and the eventual setup of the Calcutta School-Book Society was what paved the way for the

development of a modern idea of childhood in India. As has been reiterated time and again by theorists of Indian children's literature like Meena Khorana: "British colonial rule had a tremendous impact on children's literature in the subcontinent" (Khorana xi), especially after the Education Act of 1835. With the groundwork for English studies being set up in India at the primary level by the Society, (text)books began to be written solely for children for the first time in India, even though only for educational purposes at this stage. This move not only popularised the idea of having a literature separately for children, but also influenced the regional languages to realise the need for the same and urged them to come up with their own contributions to the field. Starting with the production of textbooks, there was a gradual diversification to include magazines (beginning with the Bengali children's magazine *Pashwabali*) and eventually stories for children. This period also saw the beginning of fiction writing in English for children in India, whose success inspired other Indian writers of adult fiction to take it up professionally – although more as an experiment at this initial stage because writing for adults still remained their main priority. Nevertheless, what it definitely did was to familiarise the people with the idea of having a separate literature for children and inaugurating a new phase of children's writing.

The first story book written in English for Indian children is believed to be Mary Sherwood's *Little Henry and His Bearer* (Chota Henry), which was published in 1814 and set against the backdrop of India. It explores the "relationship between an English child and an Indian child who attends on him, who is eventually converted to Christianity" (Srinivasan 32). Novels of this kind, generally referred to as the "missionary novels", became very popular among many western writers leading to a spate of such writing. *The Last Days of Boosy* (1842), also believed to be written by Sherwood, belongs to this category of writing and serves as a sequel to *Chota Henry*, continuing the sad story of the Indian servant Boosy's life story till his death. Apart from proclaiming the greatness of Christianity, this novel also includes "long passages denouncing Hinduism and the 'evil' nature of its followers" (Khorana "India" 169). Charlotte Chandler Wyckoff's *Jothy: A Story of the South Indian Jungle* (1933) is another such novel that exposes the superstitious nature of Hinduism as opposed to Christianity. The life of the protagonist and her family is shown to change dramatically, and for the better, after their conversion to Christianity. The main aim of these novels, as clear from the above instances, was to sing the praises of Christianity and encourage conversion. There were also stories written by western writers that focused on the exotic nature of India through adventure stories like Christine Weston's *Bhimsa, the Dancing Bear* (1945) or tales based on royal intrigues like Jean Bothwell's *The Thirteenth Stone: A Story of Rajputana* (1946), all of which ended up exoticising the Indians and presenting stereotypical images about the place. The best-known among them, however, was of course Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*-series. He was also known for writing *Kim* (1901), a novel which glorifies the British Raj.

Besides these western authors, there were also Indian writers who wrote for children in the English language by the twentieth century. Dhan Gopal Mukherji is usually considered to be the first one to do so, referred to by many as the "Indian Kipling" (Srinivasan 34). Although by the time he was writing for children he had already immigrated and settled down in the United States, his fiction managed to get across an insider's viewpoint – rich in intricate details about the Indian landscape and blended occasionally with Indian myths – in a way that was different from his English counterparts.

He mainly wrote wildlife fiction set in India, which included *Kari the Elephant* (1922), *Jungle, Beasts and Men* (1923), *Hari, the Jungle Lad* (1924), *Ghond the Hunter* (1928), *The Chief of the Herd* (1929), and *Fierce Face: The Story of a Tiger* (1936). His best-known novel was *Gay-neck* (1928), the story of a carrier pigeon and his companion Hira, who serve the Indian contingent of the British army during the First World War. The book was very well received and Mukherji won the Newbery award for it. Another Indian writer in English who joined the league was Reginald Lal Singh, who published *The Gift of the Forest*, together with Eloise Lowensberry in the year 1910 in New York. However, unlike Mukherji's novels, this one was, as Srinivasan points out, obviously written for a "non-Indian readership" (Srinivasan 34) as is evident in the way it "perpetuates the usual exotica and stereotypes about India: teeming wildlife, sages chanting Sanskrit hymns, cobras being calmed by music, and maharajahs on tiger hunts" (Khorana 170). Finally, there is R.K. Narayan, who won millions of hearts with his *Swami and Friends* (1935), a novel that revolves around the unforgettable character Swami and his adventures in the beautiful fictional Indian town of Malgudi.

Even though the basic foundation was already laid in the pre-independence period itself, it was still a half-baked industry with very little 'quality' work – in fact very little work in general – at the time of independence. With independence, the space of children's literature now assumed a newfound significance. Being a medium that could reach children, who with their malleable and impressionable mind were apt vehicles for disseminating nationalistic sentiments that could help build future generations of proud citizens, it made sense to mould the genre to suit these immediate needs – and that is what happened. The genre saw a sudden spurt of biographies of national figures. Fear of losing the country's rich oral tradition owing to rapid urbanisation also resulted in large scale reproductions of folk tales. These themes dominated the market, leaving little scope for original experimentations. Fictional works, if any, were highly stereotypical rather than realistic, catering more towards creating an idealistic image of the society to inculcate national pride. Despite adapting the genre for its own purposes, there was one inheritance that the children's literature market in India could not grow out of. This was the romantic ideal of the innocent child who had to be protected from the "harsh realities" of life – a concept that lies at the core of this discourse as it developed in the west. Borrowing this idea and adapting it to their own version of "harsh realities", the Indian gatekeepers decided to exclude issues of rampant illiteracy, rising crime rate, looming poverty and other structures of social injustice including caste, gender and religious divides from the aegis of this genre which ultimately resulted in blocking out all marginal voices from this domain.

Having said that, it must also be acknowledged that publishing for children in India was not altogether an easy task. Battling with multilinguality, widespread illiteracy, financial constraints, along with tough competition from foreign books, there were not many publishers who wanted to invest in this field. It was far more easier to publish low-cost retellings or biographies instead of investing in an original voice. As far as writers were concerned, they were also not easily attracted to this genre because of the poor pay. The few that joined in, were rarely experimental. Since the level of education and literacy itself was so low, very few people cared about reading beyond educational purposes. Female literacy level was even abysmal in comparison to education for males, especially in the rural areas. This had its ramifications on the texts that were produced, which were mainly centred on a

male protagonist. The poor financial resources of the reading public in India, in general, further aggravated the problem. There were not enough public libraries, leaving very little options for people from lower economic backgrounds to exercise their reading interests, even if they were literate. The books for children, with illustrations and attractive print, were costlier to produce. Added to that, there was no concept of employing attractive marketing strategies to boost up sales. Means of distribution were equally inadequate, leaving only a handful of people passionate enough to invest in the genre. Owing to multilinguality, it was impossible for a book in any one language to get wide circulation. English was increasingly becoming the link language, but had very limited readership. The market was thus, always fighting against limited readership with low purchasing power right from its very inception, discouraging writers or publishers to capitalise much in this genre. The few that were there, never had the means to experiment and fell back on the tried-and-tested themes that either evoked national sentiments or primarily depended on re-workings of classical tales or folktales or mainly focused on a middle-class protagonist, and this continued for a very long time. Voices from the margins rarely found the space to articulate themselves, leading to the creation of homogenised narratorial figures that dominated most of these early literatures catering to the few privileged children who had the education and the money to be able to buy and read such books.

Many organisations like the Children's Book Trust tried to break this pattern by encouraging original writing by organising multiple award-oriented writing competitions. Despite that, the above-mentioned issues rarely found prominent space within its narratives. Most topics that were considered taboos within children's writing, particularly the themes of sex, death and violence (even though they could be found in abundance within the domain of folk tales), were still largely missing. The girl child continued remaining an insignificant presence. These early conditions set the tone of the genre, thereby drawing up its boundaries. The world within most of these narratives thus became represented as an idealised space which was a "narrow hegemonic version of the Indian nation ... essentialised and stereotyped" (Superle 4), rather than being truly representative of the nation's diversity.

But things are slowly changing! Starting with the late twentieth-century, writers and publishers of children's literature seem to have had a change of heart. They started taking more risks by making a conscious choice to move beyond a didactic moralistic setup within a homogenised space to that of a more plural zone where marginal voices could find representation in sensitive portrayals without being sensationalised. In the west, such a trend had started from around the 1960-70s (in America) and the 1980s (in Britain). By challenging all previously held ideas about childhood, this new literature has been urging people to look upon the child as an individual who needs to be initiated into reality in a protected yet sensitive ambience which is not overtly dictatorial. In this new trend, one can notice an attempt to move beyond the restrictive limits that existed even within the so-called multicultural books. From an obsession with what is the correct thing to be 'taught' to children through literature, one is coming to recognise children as perceptive readers. There is an understanding that with proper workshops, even subjects hitherto considered taboos within children's literature can be presented in a delicate fashion and can 'educate' the child much more (and about more pertinent topics) than conventional books. From taking

accounts of children themselves and incorporating their opinions while designing books, to including issues of what all has long been considered taboos – be it marginal sexualities, issues of caste, political violence and gender – all are finding space within this new articulation. This is not to say that these texts are not potentially problematic in their own way (they have their own set of issues), but that rather for the first time there is an emphasis on the voice of the child coming to terms with the life's complexities and the plural childhoods that exist in a multicultural nation like India – and this seems like a good start.

This issue was announced as an attempt to explore this new crop within Indian English children's literature and understand what it says about the changing concept of childhood in India. Tanu Shree Singh's paper tries to scratch the surface of this new phenomenon and question our understanding of childhood and child-rearing. Through her own personal engagements in the area she shows how a major reason behind the reluctance of parents to experiment with reading material for their children is because of how they were taught to understand childhood. The childhood that has been ferried in Indian English children's books so far has been a homogenised version of the reality, one that preaches the myth of the universal republic of childhood. However, no two childhoods are similar. This is especially true in case of the Indian child whose self-making is "influenced by a complex interplay of factors such as caste, class, religion, and community" (Banerjee 183). To read such a child as a monolithic figure will inevitably lead to a tendency of intolerance which can prove dangerous in a nation as diverse as ours. In that regard, it is a happy time for children in India as publishers/authors are becoming increasingly more open to dabbling with childhoods in all its plurality. The only barrier left to transcend is that of the mediators who facilitate the distribution of these narratives to the actual target readers. Children as readers are actually more perceptive than we credit them with. It is time to stop underestimating their intake capacity and treat them as active agents in the participation of a literature that is for them.

Arpita Sarker's paper explores another pertinent area within Indian English children's literature, the area of disability. Disability again falls into the category of the inappropriate within children's literature for tarnishing the 'general tone of hopefulness' that the genre is supposed to uphold to protect the innocence of childhood for as long as possible. So far, its representation has assumed two extreme formats – either as something that should be regarded with suspicion or as something that should be pitied and hence treated as "special". On both counts, it has propagated a skewed picture on the subject, not just making it difficult for disabled children to identify with these characters but also leading to cases of them being bullied in schools and other social gatherings. Recently, in a bid to challenge these black-and-white representations of disability and making the space of children's literature more inclusive, authors and publishing houses have come together with a number of interesting titles. Arpita Sarker's paper tries to study these books and point out how these narratives show the way forward in reimagining childhood by giving more agency to the child reader.

At the speed with which the genre has been growing in the country, these essays will only have been able to graze a tiny fraction of its surface. With the boundaries of "how much is too much" for a child becoming more flexible, publishing houses – both big and small ones – are ready to shed off their inhibitions and "grapple with real problems" (Mazumdar

n.p.). But are we ready to accept it? Leave aside acceptance, are we even aware about these new changes that have crept upon this genre? Here's hoping that this issue helps undo that, even if by a little bit, and encourage more active engagement in this direction!

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**BIO-NOTE**

Dr. Anurima Chanda is currently working as an Assistant Professor in the English Department of Birsa Munda College under North Bengal University. Before this she was with The Heritage College, Kolkata. She has also worked with the Centre for Writing and Communication, Ashoka University, where among other things she has extensively worked with English Second Language (ESL) students and students with learning disabilities, trying to devise teaching modules according to individual needs. She has completed her PhD on Indian English Children's Literature from JNU. She was a pre-doctoral fellow at the University of Wuerzburg under the DAAD Programme "A New Passage to India" working under Prof. Isabel Karremann. She is also a literary translator and children's author.

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