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TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY INDIAN ENGLISH CHILDREN'S
LITERATURE"

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GENERAL ESSAY

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Children's Literature in India - Then, Now and Tomorrow

Tanu Shree Singh

Abstract:

Indian Children's Literature is growing at a time when attempts to shut voices and put blinkers on readers are on a rise. We are in a stage of metamorphosis where newer ideas and storylines are being explored, however there is also a sharp rise in monitoring what the child is reading and choosing for the child rather than with the child. From ever-shrinking shelf space to increase in gatekeeping, a large spectrum of problems present themselves in the area of children's writing. The onus of responsibility falls not just on authors and creators but also librarians, bookstore owners, teachers and parents.

Key Words:

Children's literature, disability studies, inclusion, vernacular.

In the year 1985, the only place we would get a huge variety of books was the World Book Fair in Delhi. I was in a satellite town of Delhi where even today there are no bookstores. Travel to Delhi today is a breeze but back then it took planning and the result was a child in her mum's dusty college library tearing through classics she barely understood and Wodehouse she barely appreciated. There were no children's books. The school library was overrun with academic books, encyclopaedias and multiple copies of *Oliver Twist* (which by the way ended up being the first book that made me cry).

Cut to the year 2004, the same child, now with two toddlers of her own, walked into bookstores at an alarming frequency. The sheer variety was insane - board books, small books, large books, fat books, thin books, books that opened up to be a jungle and the ones with poems - we had a huge variety. Indian authors were, however, conspicuous by their absence. We rarely saw them in book shelves.

About fifteen years later have the things changed? What has the reading scenario become from the point of view of a reader? These are some of the questions that also bring with them the semblance of an answer, a direction that we need to take. I shall now try to break them down from the perspective of an observer who sees at least a hundred queries around children's books, of a children's book enthusiast, a supporter of libraries and a writer trying to find her footing:

1. What are we looking in books as parents?

'Can you recommend a book that instills good values, truthfulness, honesty (insert 20 other values) for a three-year-old?'

Such messages constantly pop up in the online reading group that I manage. And inadvertently at least one member would say Ruskin Bond, Enid Blyton or Roald Dahl. Both the questions and responses like these are problematic. 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. In those times there was a dearth of good Indian literature that children could relate to. Even if it was being written, availability and visibility was missing.

As a parent, we need to stop looking at reading as a tool of education, something that enhances vocabulary, general knowledge and moral values. These are all secondary gains. The primary gain that books afford is the pleasure of reading, of being lost in a world that the reader creates along with the writer. In India, given the strong academic thrust, the gatekeepers vis-à-vis the parents and the librarians often get trapped in the list of 'values' that the particular book offers. In the process, we take a crucial aspect of the child's growth - the power of choice.

Books are not superheroes. They are ordinary people like you and me with extraordinary stories. Yet we either put them on a pedestal, along with a tiny idol of Goddess Saraswati, or let them languish in a corner and gather dirt like a superhero of the bygone era getting drunk in a dimly lit downtown bar, all alone. We, the people, put them in such places. There are broadly three types of people I have come across when it comes to books - the ones who quietly read, the ones who ridicule it, and the ones who take it as the sure shot path to learning - each book serving as a vessel of knowledge of values, morals, proper behaviour, vocabulary, science and probably mathematics.

2. Intolerance versus inclusion

In addition to political, religious, societal intolerance that is now on a steep rise worldwide, there is another kind of intolerance that we as parents are exercising - intolerance for diversity in literature. Rather than considering books as a perfect means of inculcating empathy and learning about a myriad of issues ranging from refugee crises to the gender spectrum, quite a few of us choose to remain stuck on stories with happy endings, with minimal emotional upheaval and complete disconnect from diverse childhoods worldwide. By denying such books, we are somewhere also turning a blind eye to existence of challenges in childhood. They exist. And it is okay for the child to know. In our bid to protect them from grave situations like discrimination based on caste, colour or gender, terrorism, poverty and more, we deny them the opportunity to exercise empathy and to be aware of children's lives other than themselves.

Till a few years back, inclusive books that the children could also relate to were hard to come by. Now thankfully that is changing. From YA reads like *Year of Weeds* to picture books like *Machher Jhol* - the body of work is steadily growing. Although, inclusion sometimes also meets with resistance from the gatekeepers owing to unfounded fears of emotional upheaval that the reader might go through. If a child cries with a character who is navigating his or her own fictional reality, the child is exercising empathy and will emerge as a more sensitive person from it! The whole point of inclusion in children's literature is appropriate representation of those who struggle to be a part of mainstream and to present an opportunity to cultivate empathy.

3. How are books being positioned in Bookstores?

Problems with bookstores are plenty apart from the gravest problem of them facing closure thanks to online availability of books at the click of a button. Apart from that, most people working at stores have little clue about the diversity of books available and most of the times end up recommending popular international titles and a handful few from India. In addition to this, most of the stores I have been to give little visibility to Indian Books. They are either languishing in the bottom shelf or the corner one that anyway gets hidden behind another shelf. This sets a vicious cycle in motion - the children don't buy what they do not see, and since the demand and sale is consequently low, they are not shelved properly. I am sure there are greater mathematical equations involving profit/loss and margins at play while deciding the shelf space, but this needs to be dealt with. Publishers, authors and bookstore owners need to come together and make good Indian Literature more visible.

4. What about vernacular languages?

Past few years have brought forth an interesting experience for me in the library space. I have one library in a city and the other in a remote Himalayan village. The city kids rarely look for Hindi books and the village kids told me very clearly to get more Hindi books. Another interesting thing was that the library kids found it hard to relate to a character who was from a village like theirs in most of the Hindi books they flipped through! Is it because we are still stuck on an age-old narrative of how a village and a villager should be?

It is fairly recent that good Hindi books have started getting more visible in the Children's literature world. There is however a dearth of books for early readers onwards. The choices are mostly limited to picture books. For the children everywhere to be more connected with languages other than English as well as children of a background different from them, we need to consciously build literature which is diverse as well as relatable.

5. What about the emotions that make us uncomfortable?

A majority of parents often look for books that add value in terms of academic as well as character growth, however they often shy away from books that present uncomfortable emotions or questions. This is more common to the generation of parents now than the earlier one. As a young reader, I do not remember my parents monitoring the books and preventing me from reading books that had a dark theme or talked about uncomfortable issues like death, loss, mental illness - the list now grows every year. Somewhere in our bid to protect our children, we are taking away their ability to process and deal with life. The very things we protect them from are a reality for a lot of children out there. There is no research available that supports the claim put forth fairly often that children's books need to be a happy space. Children do experience sadness, anger and a whole lot of other shades of emotions. By keeping such books away from them, we are somewhere denying the existence of such emotions, existence of the young reader's reality.

The Indian Children's Literature space is growing by leaps and bounds but the growth could be far more accelerated if rather than being gate keepers we shifted our role to an accepting reader, if shelves shouted much louder about books written here, and if we the

parents let the children read whatever they please, whenever they please, for the sheer fun of it rather than arming ourselves with the not-so-secret agenda of teaching them.

BIO-NOTE

Dr. Tanu Shree Singh is an Assistant Professor in Psychology. She completed her studies in Positive Psychology, a relatively new and promising branch of psychology devoted to cultivating contented, happy, fulfilling lives. She extensively writes on issues related to parenting and has been published in leading online dailies and communities. Her approach to parenting, rooted in her academic background, draws heavily from her experiences as a parent and a mentor. Her passion for reading and getting more children to read led her to set up two libraries in Faridabad and Tirthan Valley. She also supports 13 other libraries in Himachal. She is the author of *Keep Calm and Mommy On*, *DK Indian Icons: CV Raman* and has contributed to the anthologies *Flipped* and *I'd rather read*.

E-mail id: tanu1975@gmail.com