

Voices of Imagination: Celebrating Women Writers in Children's Literature

Dr. Anjali Verma

Associate Professor

Department of English, Smt.MMK College of Commerce and Economics
Mumbai, India

drarver@yahoo.com

Abstract

The area of women in children's literature has a wide scope since India is a secular state with diverse languages and cultures. Every region and language has its own history of children's literature while translations are another area of studies. Therefore, multi-linguistic nation has tremendous scope for translations. Apart from regional languages, English is also widely used in India and translations of western children's literature into Indian languages are highly popular. Similarly, regional literature has many stories to tell and are often translated to many languages. There are also writers who write exclusively in English. Their works are original indigenous works in English. These writers are like mirrors reflecting the Indian society, culture and its people.

The area of children's literature is now largely populated by women writers and women writers now outnumber men in this field. Today there are many NRI women writers who write about Indian subjects. As the contribution of women to children's literature grows, so does the necessity of studying their works. The paucity of criticism in children's literature in India urges for more study in this field.

Keywords: children's literature, regional literature, female writers, indian literature

Introduction

The fascinating world of children's literature is a less explored field of literature. Since women have been considered by many as natural story tellers, it is interesting to study their work. Children's literature did not exist as a separate field of study in India for a long time. The ancient text Panchatantra which consists of fables was told to children orally. Though written for adults, it has continued to be popular with children. The term children's literature is a western concept. From the post-colonial period to the early 1990s, children

were exposed to western fiction. Many generations grew up reading Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, Louis Carol and Enid Blyton. Among the works in India, Anant Pai's *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Twinkle* comics are very popular.

Literature is a reflection of life. The same thought can be extended to children's literature. The life of children is reflected in children's literature. Minds are moulded when they are young. Family is the first institution where children learn to talk, communicate, read and write. Education of the child is considered one of the major aspects of development. Children like to play, imagine, are enthusiastic and energetic. The colourful thoughts of children can be given wings through children's literature so that children may go on a journey to imaginary lands. Apart from that, children's literature may mould lives through inspiration and creativity. Children's literature plays a vital role in crafting the minds of children.

There are many criticisms on western literature. Translations have far reaching effects. They cater to specific needs of the readers as their reachability to other languages is limited. But the disadvantage of translations is that they are not original. Children may like to read, and may benefit more from originals over the translated versions. For example, *Panchatantra* or *Jataka Tales* would sound authentic in the regional languages.

But the original writing for children reflects the present state of affairs in the world of children's literature in India. Children's literature is measured under different scales since the stages of a child's growth range from infancy, childhood, youth and adulthood. There are many physiological and psychological changes that take place gradually. Hence, children's literature is categorized into various age groups.

When books can delight and entertain children, the learning comes automatically. Every society believes that children are the future and they should be moulded in order to make them ready for adult endeavors. India has a rich tradition of storytelling. Myths and folktales are the main sources. Though exclusive literature for children did not historically exist, most of the stories considered suitable for children were taken from adult literature like the *Panchatantra*, *Jataka Tales*, *Kathasarith Sagar* and Mythology. The oral tradition existed in India for centuries until the time of colonial rule. Children's literature is a recent phenomenon. It is considered as a separate genre only in the 19th century. In India the colonial rule has introduced western literature. The British introduced children's books which were mostly religious and moralistic in nature. Gradually, distinction between adult and children's literature began to emerge. The indigenous literature started gaining visibility in post independent era.

History of Children's Literature

World War II had saw changes to the traditions of both American and British children's literature. The importance of education gained momentum and the living standards of people increased. Radio, television and improvement in print media all had tremendous influence on children's literature. Children's literature of Britain and America had tremendous influence on Indian literature both in English and other regional languages. Yet we have our own history of children's literature in India.

In ancient India, Sanskrit language was prevalent. Most of the Indian literature was available in Sanskrit. Brahmana texts (1000-500BC) indicate that oral forms of literature existed historically. The *Brahat Katha* or the Great story by Gunadhya, and Somadeva's *Katha Sarit Sagar* (11 A.D.) were popular as the narratives were pure in their form. The *Jataka Tales* by Buddhists were also popular fables of wit and wisdom. Successive generations have drawn inspiration from these stories to produce their own literature.

Since the ancient time till the present day *Panchtantra* has been considered as the main source of children's literature. It was present in the oral tradition and the authors were unknown. Later, it was written by Vishnu Sharma in 300B.C. The book consists of fables with animal characters and is aimed at teaching 'nithi; (right living) and worldly conduct. Though instructional, the entertainment value of *Panchtantra* is high. Many travelers from Asia and Europe introduced the tales of *Panchtantra* in their own countries. These have been translated and adapted into more than 200 world languages. Most of the *Panchtantra* stories are animal tales which teach worldly wisdom and practical ways of living to make life rich and happier. The plots of these stories are knitted around adult intrigues. Physically weak and helpless chracters are shown winning over the strong and powerful with their wit and trickery. The themes of many of these tales were later taken by Aesope and other writers. The impact of *Panchtantra* was so strong that it inspired many writers across the globe to adapt their own culture to weave their own stories. Almost all Indian languages have also brought out many versions of *Panchtantra* and published them extensively.

The field of children's literature is relatively new to India. Where it did exist historically, it was in oral form. For example, the bedtime stories usually told by grandparents and mothers. This oral tradition mostly consists of folktale and folklore passed on from generation to generation. These stories are general in subject and not exclusively meant for children.

The entire concept of children's literature in India changed after the invasion of the British colonies. The establishment of the European colonies, mainly British colonies introduced western literature in India. The western influence crept into the Indian homes. The emergence of a new literate middle class saw the importance of schooling and education. Many parents started sending their children to English medium schools. The English language, bequeathed by the empire builders, was used as an instrument of power initially, and later as an effective tool of communication.

In India, many regional language books were produced for children. In Bengal the School Book society brought out text books for children and *Peshwabali*, the first Bengali children's magazine, was published. Ishwar Chand Vidya Sagar (1820-91) is considered as the father of children's literature in India. He published *Betal Panchabinsati* which are read to this day. Mrs. Sherwood's *Chota Henry* (1814), set in India, is the tale of an English boy and his attendant, an Indian boy of the same age, and their relationship. Toru Dutt, a child prodigy from Bengal wrote *Ancient Ballads* and *Legends of Hindustan* which are considered as children's classics. It is observed that most of the initial writings were either translations of the western children's literature or revised version of ancient Indian texts like *Panchtantra* or *Jataka Tales*. Western classics like *Robinson Crusoe* and *Treasure Island*, fairy tales by Hanes Christian Anderson, and stories from Arabian Nights like *Alibaba*, *Forty Thieves* and *Aladdin and the Magic Lamp* were translated to many Indian languages. These books were well received by the Indian child reader.

The bilingual form of education is followed to this day in many Indian educational institutions. The language that was initially acquired for the purpose of communication became a symbol of prestige in elite society which later on spread to middle class. English language is associated with modernity and elitism. The English education resulted in East –West conflict of values. The reading habits in all age groups lead to the establishment of modern children's literature in India along with main stream literature. The children were enthralled to read fairytales and fantasies from the West like *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Thumbelina*, *The Frog Prince*, *Little Mermaid* by Hans Christian Anderson, *Alice in Wonderland* by Louis Carol and stories of adventure like *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe, *Robin Hood* by Pierce Egans, *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain and many other popular western classics. Doubts were raised by many critics about alienation of the western texts which may not be identified by Indian child audience. But the popularity of western literature among Indian children showed their enthusiasm to explore the unknown

terrains of the West. The impact and influence of this literature is altogether a different issue which is debatable. Apart from the novels, comic strips like *Phantom*, *Tarzan*, *Spiderman*, *Superman*, *Archies*, *Tintin* etc. were also accepted and extensively read by Indian children even to this day. Though alien, the western culture had attracted and enticed the Indian child audience. The original Indian writings in English by Indian writers started in late 19th century. The child reader then readily switched on to these forms of writings with equal ease and enthusiasm.

The original Indian English children's literature was started by some eminent writers who felt the need to produce original Indian stories for children in India. Dhan Gopal Mukherjee, an immigrant to United States has written for children in 1920s. He is the first Indian writer to write in English for children. His story settings are mainly Indian jungles. *Kari*, *The Elephant* (1923), *Jungle Beast and Men* (1923), *Hari the Jungle Lad* (1924) and *Ghond The Hunter* (1928) are his jungle stories. His book *Gay Neck* (1928) is a war time story about a pigeon which won him the prestigious Newbery award.

Rabindranath Tagore, the great literary genius of India's contribution to children's literature is also noteworthy. He believed in the uninhibited mind of a child, free with its own expression. He put his thoughts in exploring the child's psyche in short stories like *Kabuliwalla* and *Home Coming*. Another writer whose name is synonymous to children's literature is Ruskin Bond. He is a writer from the mountains of Dehradun. He has an English lineage. Most of his works are autobiographical in tone. The timelessness of his themes, innocence of his child characters, his sensitivity and his narrative methods makes his works authentic. His works *The Room on the Roof* (1956), *The Young Vagabonds* (1961), *The Hidden Pool* (1966), *Grandfather's Private Zoo* (1967), and *Our Trees Still Grow In Dehra* (1991) and many other stories are widely read by children as they are enchanting and entice children. Another mainstream writer from South India is R.K.Narayan. His book *Swami and His Friends* is considered a Children's classic. His legendary South Indian town Malgudi with myriad hues richly depict the lifestyle of people of South India in the pre-independent era. The story revolves around the boy named Swami and his friends and their adventures. The innocent child's play, the fights and friendship are excellently woven by R.K.Narayan, whose understanding of a child's psyche created this enthralling masterpiece. The statesmen like Rajgopalchari and Pandit JawaharLal Nehru also contributed to children's literature in their own capacity. While Rajaji used Bhaktias as his theme and retold Ramayan in English,

Nehru narrated the story of mankind in *Glimpses of World's History* and the more popular *Letters to Daughter from a Father* which was published by CBT.

Some contemporary mainstream writers have occasionally written for children. They include Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie, Manoj Das and others. Anita Desai's *The Village By The Sea* (1982) and Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea Stories* are layered with the survival endeavors of less privileged children in the adult dominated world. Manoj Das is a great story teller and a bilingual writer who writes in Odia and English. He has also written many good stories for children. Some of his popular books are *Temples of India* (1970), *Tales from Many Lands* (1972), *Persian Tales of Wit and Delight* (1970) and *Books For Ever* (1973). *A Bride Inside a Casket and Other Stories* (1973) was published by Times Book International. Apart from these eminent writers, there are many other writers who have produced exclusive children's literature that are well received by the child audience. Some of the writers have been awarded prizes for their contribution. The substantial contributions by many such writers are opening new avenues in the field of children's literature.

Categories of Children's Literature

The understanding level of children at different ages varies and so do their interests. Hence, children's literature should be written according to the age group of the child. The genres of children's literature are similar to adult's literature with a few exceptions. The books which are the expressions of the simplest joys of life are needed by children. They transcend into the world of imagination and fantasy. Genres which set the mood for this kind of experience are fantasy and fairytales. Hans Christian Anderson's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and Perault's *Cinderella* are a few examples of fairytales. The readers are transcended into a dreamland. The writer with his own imagination, conception and observation creates a world full of magical elements that are amusing and exciting. The children live in the world of fantasy which is like a dream.

Suniti Namjoshi's *Aditi Series* are the best examples of children's fantasy stories. The short version of fantasy is fairytale. They have universal appeal. One of the common qualities of children is imagination. The writer shows his imaginative skills to create a fantasy world full of action. It has a short story structure but lot of activity takes place. Hans Christian Anderson and Perault's fairytales are popular. The other popular fairytales are *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Golden Goose*, *The Frog Prince* etc. Fairytales are enchanting. Fairytales will create an interest in reading. Children can be encouraged to expand their experiences with books in this manner.

Pleasure reading is a prime concern of children's fiction. But as books are the source of knowledge, they should also deal with subjects that enhance their value education. Fables are one such genre which caters to this need. Fables are abstract stories which speak about morals and wit. They usually have animals and birds as characters. They help in sociological aspect of child's development. *Panchtantra* and *Aesop's Fables* are some of the most widely read examples.

Folktales and folklore also form an interesting aspect of children's literature. Most of the rural culture is introduced in this genre. Folktales and folklore are the genres which depict the culture, traditions, mores and taboos prevalent in a place. They help the people to understand their own culture. The folklore is usually in oral form and presents different moods. Heroic deeds of many kings as well as common men are narrated. Folklore also consists of themes like festivities and traditions followed during family functions like marriage, child birth, house warming ceremonies and even death.

The short story and novel are the other genres. They are constructed around a broad idea. The theme can vary from history, mythology, science or adventure. Children's literature across the globe has a rich collection of novels with varied themes. The classics include *Alice in Wonderland*, *Chronicles of Narnia*, adventure stories by Enid Blyton like *Famous Five*, *Secret Seven* and the detective series *Nancy Drew* (in which protagonist is a tomboy) and many more works from the west are very popular. The Indian writers too have produced some good novels for children including Ruskin Bond's novels *The Room on the Roof*, *The Young Vagrants* and *The Hidden Pool*, Suniti Namjoshi's *Aditi* series, Dilip Salve's science fiction and many others. Apart from the main genre, the other genres are autobiographies, biographies, travelogues, dramas, one-act plays, poetry, encyclopedias, picture dictionaries and popular literature like comic strips, magazines etc. This vast genre of books provides children more knowledge about their surroundings and much anticipated pleasure.

Manorama Jafa, Sigrun Shrivastava and Sandhya Rao's story books make for good reading to small children from three to ten years age-group. Since age of a child plays a vital role in defining children's literature, it is important to conceptualize fiction, especially the 'teenage fiction' since it is the most confusing period as it is considered to be transition period from childhood to adulthood. Adolescence is a period of both psychological and physiological changes which also attribute to the changes in the reading concepts of a child. The character formation of teenagers is influenced to a certain extent by teenage fiction. They appreciate the relevance of teenage fiction to their life.

The present-day teenage fiction is written in a lively manner which is a prominent factor. The themes include friendship, love, adventure, drugs, running away, bullying, crime, fantasy, supernatural, science fiction and many other genres which are more pertinent to teenagers. *The Room On The Roof* (1993) and *The Young Vagrants* (1993) by Ruskin Bond, *The Secret Seven* by Enid Blyton and *Hardy Boys* series by Franklin Dixon and other books which are contemporary like *Bend It Like Beckham* by Narinder Dharmi, Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident Of The Dog In The Night*, Jacqueline Wilson's *Girls Under Pressure* deal with teenagers and their relationships. Apart from these there are books on realism and contemporary problems. These novels act as a path to help teenagers confront their personal problems. Some books address social issues like racism and war and help them to come to terms with difficult situations and help them to become responsible citizens. One of the most delicate and sensitive issue in teenage fiction is sex. Teenage novels also explore relationships of teenagers with the members of their family and other age groups. Novels on family ties and break-ups like Anne Fine's *Madame Doubtfire* (1989) provide insight into the problems of a broken family. The complexities of simple friendships are delved into in many novels. The personal growth of characters in these themes has a positive influence on the minds of teenage readers.

Women in Children's Literature

Women generally engage children with stories. Mostly grandmothers and mothers would tell bedtime stories to children. Many forms of narratives were used by them like lullabies, cradle songs, tongue twisters, nursery rhymes, folktales and folklore. The stories of *Krishnaleela* were the most favorite with children apart from other mythological stories from the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Jataka Tales* and *Katha sarith Sagar*. These oral traditions later took print form. As the scripts in different languages developed, many of these were written on palm leaves and bhojapatra long before the age of paper and printing. These ancient stories, folktales and folklore were the only children's literature available which were told and retold.

The present day has seen an increase in the number of writers of children's literature. Women occupy a prominent place in them. Sunithi Namjoshi, Manorama Jafa, Sigrun Shrivastava, Polie Sengupta, Paro Anand, Anita Desai, Uma Krishnaswami, Sandhya Rao, Ira Saxena, Pratibha Nath, Neelima Sinha, Indira Ananta Krishnan, Swapna Dutta and many others have been accepted as good writers of children's literature.

Many women writers who do not specialize in children's literature have also written books for children. Suniti Namjoshi, Manorama Jafa, Sigrun Shrivastav, Polie Sengupta, Paro Anand, Anita Desai, Uma Krishnaswami, Sandhya Rao, Ira Saxena, Prathiba Nath, Neelima Sinha, Indira Ananta Krishnan, Swapna Dutta and many others have been accepted as good children's writers. The substantial contributions by many such writers are opening new avenues in the field of children's literature.

In conclusion, the growth of children's literature in India is noteworthy. Celebrating women writers in children's literature is not just about recognition; it is about fostering an inclusive, diverse, and enriching literary environment, promoting equality and paving the way for more inclusive storytelling.

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