

Indian Children's Literature Creates a Safe Space for Conversations on Hard Topics

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Abstract

This paper revolves around the themes at present blooming in Indian Children's literature that creates a safe space for conversations on topics we don't discuss with kids with special reference to four stories that portray the themes of identity crisis, gender roles, child abuse faced inside home and the life of a transgender in a society. Parents are only familiar with fairy tales, tales of adventures, mystery and magic. Those tales were meant to instil the values of bravery, courage and friendship. But at present children face a lot of problems ranging from stress, anxiety to gender, race discriminations. Indian children's literature recently added a handful of books that dealt with issues faced by children and gave them a safe space to find out answers to the questions that popped in their mind. Issues like identity crisis, gender roles, migration, violence and grief like globally affected topics are included in children's literature to create awareness among them. This paper portrays four books that are perfect vehicles to start conversations on topics that we don't talk with kids.

Keywords: children's literature, new face of Indian children's literature, Identity crisis, gender roles, transgender children's literature, child abuse.

The very first thing that comes to our mind when we think about Children's Literature is fairy tales, tales of adventures, stories that discuss themes of bravery, knighthood and courage.

These stories were meant to inculcate moral values in kids. The stories they hear, the visuals they see and the experience they gain have a very important role in moulding a child's overall attitude and personality. Earlier the first connections of a child to literature begins from hearing stories but at present children are exposed to a world filled with all kind of information. They get to know about everything in a single click. Children are preoccupied with the visuals as well as stories and from that they develop notions regarding identity and how to treat people.

At present Indian Children's Literature is perfectly portraying stories with hard themes. In the era of technological development children particularly from nuclear families face different kinds of problems ranging from depression to identity crisis. The quest for knowledge and self-identity leads a child to Google and search. The need for providing right kind of information at childhood itself has become a need. Indian children's literature has taken a new face with stories that discuss the themes of gender roles, identity crisis, depression, child abuse and LGBT rights. Books are the perfect transporting agents

that create a space for children to understand these tough topics. This paper tries to introduce such stories that strongly portray the concept of identity.

The first story is "*The Boy in the Cupboard*" written by HarshalaGupte and illustrated by Priya Dali. The story revolves around a boy named Karan who always locks himself inside a cupboard because he feels it as the safest place in the whole world. Every child or an adult might have experienced a point where he cannot place himself; he might feel like he does not belong to this world. This story is a perfect choice to read and narrate to a child so that he can understand he is not alone there are people who suffer this identity crisis. Karan's friends make fun of him for his pink bat and his kitchen set. We know that at an early stage of childhood gender roles are forced like pink is the colour for girls and blue is the colour for boys. Girls play with kitchen set and dolls because they are meant to become good homemakers and mothers while boys play with cars and guns to show their masculinity. Society always reminds a girl child that you do not belong to your home you are supposed to go to your husband's home similarly boys should never cry they are meant to be strong and bold. These ideas are diffused into a child's mind at an early stage by the society. The new stories highlight the themes like a boy playing with a doll or kitchen set is not

an issue. When such themes pop up children find a space where they relate themselves with characters.

The next story is Menaka Raman's "*Loki takes Guard*" that highlights the story of a 12 year old girl who loves playing cricket. Once upon a time we know our society considered a boy child a blessing and girl child was considered unlucky. Loki's parents were too involved in his brother's studies that they never gave attention to Loki. Loki loved playing cricket but the team in the locality had a strict boy's only rule. When Loki realised that no one is going to support her she stood for herself and filed a petition. No one signed in favour of her until a twitter page took Loki's case and it became viral. This story portrays the age old structured mind of the society regarding gender roles and breaks it. It highlights the theme of equal opportunities. Earlier girls were not allowed to participate in sports because it was only meant for boys. We may think that now the situation has changed girls are getting equal opportunities but the fact is that it is because of a supportive family many girls come up. Most of the families in this 21st century also strictly ask their girl children to stay at home because they will become darker in skin tone if they play sports, they will have to wear small shorts which is against their so called culture. There are parents who think like this and act foolishly curbing the dreams of many talented girls. This story breaks the notion that cricket is not only meant for boys but for girls too.

The story *Budgie, Bridge and Big Djinn* by RanjithLal shows the possible things inside a family in contrast to the happy home concept. The children portrayed in the story had gone through tough situations like abusive father and battles. The story also throws light on the danger caused by environmental degradation. Always in children's literature home is portrayed as a safe and happy place. The recent statistics regarding child abuse cases mark that child abuse at home by family members has terribly increased. Children are not safe at their own home. We were shocked by the newspaper reports in which we saw parents physically torturing and killing their own kids. This story is presenting a family that is common to us. It depicts a similar family that we find in news and hence children are aware of things happening around them. These stories help understand what child abuse is and what is wrong and what is right.

The story *Friends under the Summer Sun*, written by Ashuthosh Pathak portrays the theme of transgender. Two children bake a cake together and one is fascinated by the way the boy has painted his nails and collected sequined sandals. She asks him whether he is a boy or a girl? The story creates a feeling that there is another category other than male and female. Children at the early age gets a picture about a transgender this will make them treat transgender as a normal person.

Stories at present take up themes like climate change, migration, violence to provide the clear picture of world. Children get acquainted with the real world and different kinds of people and they learn how to treat them. They also understand how to place themselves in this stereotyped world.

The new Indian Children's Literature questions certain beliefs regarding gender roles and identity crisis that were asked blindly to believe in. Stories with transgender as characters help children to understand really who they are and how to treat them. These stories evoke a feeling of inclusivity in children. These narratives on identity broaden the limits set by society in a child's mind and they provide the actual picture of how world works. There are plenty of collections of short stories that portray how people feel othered in the title of disability, race, caste or sexual orientation. These stories help children to find a safe space for themselves. Stories with these globally affected topics help children to know the real working of world by identifying themselves and others. These books prevent children from building rigid stereotypes and hence develop them to become human beings with an open heart of accepting the way people are. These stories are categorised as children's literature but first they should be read by adults so that they can break their stereotyped mind.

References

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