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Telling Stories Through Pictures: A Reading of Some Select Indian Children's Narratives

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Abstract:

The demand and choices of children's texts have increased rapidly in a few years. Likewise, parents also divert the mind of their children's with cartoon magazines and comics which keep children entertained and happy. Children books typically contain articles, pictures, and letters which help children to grab things easily. Children always learn things rapidly at an earlier age when learn through images, pictures, graphics or animated form. There are many ways to communicate a story, one can tell it, sing it, act it, write it, film it and can draw it. Each form of storytelling has its unique characteristics that separate it from the other forms. However, there has been a form of storytelling that uses words and pictures. It is through the picture book art-form that child reader continues to develop assumptions about the world and its people along with an understanding of different cultures. The present paper attempts to highlight how through pictures the child readers can make connections to themselves, their lives and experiences. The paper will also highlight how through picture books children can impact on building their vocabulary, strengthen visual thinking skills, create connections and introduce them to read and

encourage conversations. It will also thus encompass the role of children books and how they transfer information from pictures to real world contexts.

Keywords: picture books, children, imagination, stories, children literature.

Introduction-

Stories play an important role in everyday conversation as we all communicate by telling stories about different aspects of life. Everybody loves a good story, especially children. There are an infinite number of stories to tell. Authentic or “real” storybooks are clearly preferable to adapted stories as they offer a rich source of authentic input. They are also highly motivating and challenging. Children do not need to understand every single word, because pictures, gestures and intonation will help them to understand the main gist, providing a strong sense of achievement. Stories help to develop a child's imagination by introducing new ideas into their world- ideas about fantastical worlds, other planets, different points in time, invented characters. It will encourage children to realize that they can, and should imagine anything they want. Stories help us to understand others and ourselves. We feel empathy with the characters we encounter in stories. The ability to learn from stories is a skill that will help the child readers throughout their lives and provide guidance to living.

Picture books are an important source in the development of new language, concepts, and lessons for young children. Picture books are profusely illustrated with images in which the pictures are essential to complete understanding and enjoyment of the story. The illustrations may provide clues to the setting, plot, characterization and mood. It is the interdependence of art and text. The main content is presented through combination of text and illustration. Classification is based on format, not on genre and almost all genres appear in picture books. Types of picture books

include baby and toddler books; alphabet, counting and other concept books; wordless books; picture storybooks; pattern books; and beginning readers. This paper will look into the different aspects of picture books in the Indian context and how it can influence the child readers to transfer information from pictures to real world contexts.

Discussion –

Children literature is characterized through its content (topic and manner), quality, and values (personal and academic). Children's literature is diverse and varied. For example, children's literature includes the following genres: picture books, fantasy, traditional literature, poetry, biography and autobiography, and informational books. Children's literature can be instructional or entertainment oriented, and can be also used for the purposes of facilitating academic disciplines including scientific subjects, social studies, etc. Moreover, children's literature have advantage over text books at schools since it provides the content in depth, and engage all the sensual skills of the child including voice-reading, mind-reading, writing styles, etc. Children's literature is a powerful medium to train and teach children about what is happening in the world around them by themselves, as well as by others. Children's literature encourages children to do brain storming, creative thinking, enrich their language and develop a desire to know the facts, information, etc. It also gives a scope to know their socio-cultural background, heritage and develop their personality.

Children's literature is any literature that is written and produced for the benefit of children. The age range for children's literature is from early childhood through the period of early adolescence. Fictitious and non-fictional works in various forms- contemporary realism, fantasy, fairy tales, poetry, essays, historical fiction, folklore, legends, myths and epics- all have

their equivalent in children's literature. Even in today's techn-savvy generation, its content attracts, instructs and entertains children. In *Children's Literature: A Very Short Introduction*, Kimberley Reynolds defines the term 'children's literature' as follows,

From newspapers and other media to schools and in government documents, it is understood to refer to the materials written to be read by children and young people, published by children's publishers, and stocked and shelved in the children's and/or young adult(YA) sections of libraries and bookshops.(1)

The interests, tastes, attitudes, liking and dislikes of children and young adults are kept in mind while creating such literature. With a broad panorama of children's literature, Reynolds continues writing about the scope and possibility of children's literature as follows,

Currently, everything from folk and fairy tales, myths and legends, ballads and nursery rhymes – many of which date back to preliterate age as e-books, fan fiction, and computer games may come under the umbrella of children's literature. (2)

By the second decade of the twenty first century, there are significant developments in the genre of children's literature in India. Even the lesser experimented genres like detective fiction and science-fiction have now gained impetus into this field. On the other hand, mythological fiction has also emerged as a new kind of genre peculiar to Indian children's literature in comparison to the western counterpart. Ruskin Bond has also admitted, "Compared to 10 or 15 years ago, children's literature is now being taken seriously by publishers." By the end of 2020, children's literature ought to touch new

landmarks.

The decade 2010-2020 also saw an upward swing in the picture book category. Picture books are usually regarded as iconic of children's literature category and trivial for that matter. Peter Hunt, a leading theorist in children's literature observes regarding picture books:

This is merely proof of the essential triviality of the form: what place is there in a respectable literary system for what is usually a thirty-two-page text, often with minimal words, and intended for scarcely literate audience? Further, what place does something essentially non-verbal have in a literary system at all?

The answers are straightforward. The first is that reading a picture book is an extremely sophisticated act. The second is that, with a minority of exceptions, the word-picture interaction is vital and fundamental. (Hunt 288)

This is because the process of reading picture books involves an interaction of “non- linear ‘reading’ of the picture to linear processing of words” (ibid).

Perry Nodelman, an important theorist of children's literature, describes the impact of picture books on children and how they help them respond to their perception of the world around them. He says:

Because we assume that pictures, as iconic signs, do in some significant way actually resemble what they depict, they invite us to see objects as the pictures depict them – to see the actual in terms of the fictional visualization of it....

Furthermore, the intended audience of picture books is by definition inexperienced

– in need of learning how to think about their world, how to see and understand themselves and others. Consequently, picture books are a significant means by which we integrate young children into the ideology of our culture. (Nodelman 131)

There are many picture books that have surfaced based on Indian mythology and epics. This category of picture books usually has a twist in the narrative, at the same time writers in this category have used myths to cultivate curiosity and moral understanding in children.

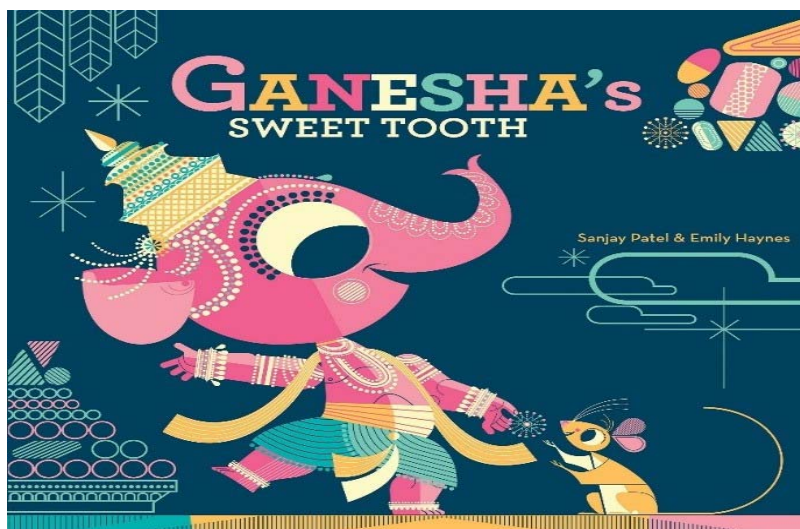


Fig:1

Sanjay Patel and Emily Haynes have created a picture book, *Ganesha's Sweet Tooth* (2012, Fig.1 above) with graphic illustrations. They write in the author's note:

One of the most well-known myths in Hinduism is the tale of Ganesha breaking his tusk. In it, the poet Vyasa requests that the Mahabharata be transcribed by the mighty god Ganesha. As long as Vyas can recite the poem continuously, Ganesha agrees to assist. Vyasa accepts the requirement that Ganesha comprehends all of his statements before recording them in writing.

Ganesha's pen breaks not long after they start. Astute Ganesha swiftly splits off his tusk to continue writing, and he uses that to complete recording the tale (Patel and Haynes).

This book introduces Ganesha as a naughty child who is just like other children. As it goes in mythology, this Ganesha too loves to eat. He also has his friend Mr. Mouse who is his vehicle in traditional narratives. Then one day Ganesha and Mr. Mouse come across “the super jumbo jawbreaker laddoo.” Mr. Mouse warns Ganesha not to have it as it will break his tusk. But Ganesha remains convinced that being a god he is invincible. He has the laddoo and as he bites his tusk breaks. Ganesha is ashamed of his broken tusk. He thinks that everyone will make fun of him now. Out of anger he throws his broken tusk at the moon but it travels and strikes an old man. The old man turns out to be sage Vyasa who says to Ganesha that he needs someone to transcribe his poem but that would not be possible with a common pen as no pen can sustain that long. Therefore, Vyasa asks Ganesha to write it with his broken tusk. The story thus surprises the reader with its twist as Ganesha is gradually transformed from a naughty boy into a serious and sad child once he has broken his tusk. He is then made to understand the use of his broken tusk by Vyasa and thus his happiness is restored and at the same time he is engaged in the writing of the great epic.

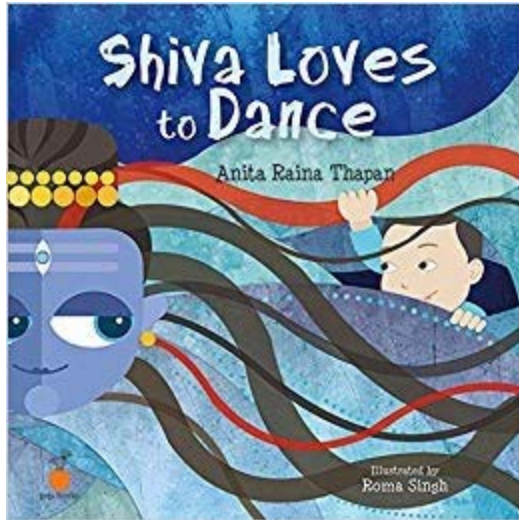


Fig :2



Fig:3

Anita Raina Thapan's *Shiva Loves to Dance* (2015, Fig. 2) and *Little Hanuman* (2016, Fig. 3) beautifully describe Hanuman and Shiva in Hindu mythology through the conversations between the mother and the child. *Shiva Loves to Dance* introduces the readers to a child named Gittoo who becomes fascinated with Shiva seeing his sister Gauri offering him flowers before her dance performance. The same night Gittoo asks his mother about Lord Shiva. His mother explains that Shiva is the first dancer as his dance created the world. Thapan also gives a twist to her story by resorting to the demon trampled under his foot. When Gittoo asks about him, she tells his name: "Apasmara." Then his mother explains about this demon Apasmara:

It is Apasmara who makes brothers and sisters fight with each other. He also makes people greedy so that they always want more and more... makes us forget that we are born to do good things; to love and look after each other; to take care of plants, trees, animals, birds and fish (Thapan 2015).

On the other hand, *Little Hanuman* continues with the conversation between Gittoo and his mother. Standing on his balcony Gittoo looks down at the swimming pool which looks very small from there. Out of this curiosity he asks his mother innocently if anyone could dive from the balcony into the swimming pool and come out unhurt. His mother replies that only Hanuman can do such a thing. She explains that it was not the magic but that Hanuman was blessed with special powers by his father Vayu, the God of Wind, Shiva and his mother Anjani.

Little Hanuman continues with naughty adventures of Hanuman as a child who becomes a cause of concern for everyone. When they are unable to bear the naughty acts of Hanuman they go to Brahma, the creator, and ask him to withdraw his powers. But Brahma denies stating that Hanuman is blessed by Shiva and therefore his powers cannot be withdrawn. Later, Brahma comes up with the solution that Hanuman would forget about his power only when he grows up and meets someone very special, it is only then that his special powers will be restored. However, this ends all the fun for Gittoo as he exclaims “So sad” as Hanuman will now not be able to act naughtily anymore. Then onwards Hanuman becomes as common as other children. He becomes serious and starts studying. This story shows the transition in the character of Hanuman as a child who was naughty and becomes serious and studious. Perry Nodelman suggests that sometimes picture books evince “a process of colonization” in which the “books persuade them of conceptions of themselves as children that suit adult needs and purposes” (Nodelman 1999: 135). Picture books based on myths project this tendency of inclining children towards reading, writing and studying and fulfilling their mission of civilizing them if not colonizing them.



Fig: 4 Fig: 5

Kavitha Mandana and Nayantara Surendranath's *A Pair of Twins* (2014, Fig.4) is based on the relationship between two twins: a girl child named Sundari and a baby elephant called Lakshmi. The text takes a feminist angle of girls being equal to boys. Sundari's father is a mahout and next in line would be his son. So, when Sundari expresses her desire of being a chief mahout it goes against the family and social tradition. As the narrative develops it so happens that the elephant that was being trained for the traditional Dussehra procession falls sick and there is no elephant that can replace him except Lakshmi who has now grown as large as other elephants. When it is suggested to the Maharaja and Maharani that Lakshmi can be trained for the procession the major opposition comes from Sundari's father. However, the Maharani agrees that Sundari will train Lakshmi and be the leading mahout. The politics of representation has also been projected in the story as the Maharani says that Sundari has to lead the procession in men's clothing, but Sundari says that she would like to lead the procession as a woman. Thus, the twins manage to create a space for themselves amidst the patriarchal traditions of society.

Chitra Sounder's *Farmer Falgu Goes to the Market* (2014, Fig.5) and *Farmer Falgu Goes on a Trip* (2014, Fig.6) are special in their approach as they offer not only the pictures, and the words but also the sounds. These two books paint a picture of rural India. They are based on onomatopoeic words as Farmer Falgu sets on his trip. Both the texts make use of irony and hilarious twists in their narration. What can be noted in these books is the "information about the sequential activity" (Nodelman 1999: 137). It can be seen that "the sequential pictures of a picture book imply all the actions that would take the character from the fixed position depicted in one picture to the fixed position in the next" (Nodelman 1999: 137). *Farmer Falgu Goes to the Market* is story about Falgu going to sell off tomatoes, onions, chilies, coriander, white eggs, brown eggs, and duck eggs. But as he moves, his eggs begin to crack with jerks, his tomatoes are crushed by the sack of onions and when he is in the market his coriander is eaten by goats. Everything that he has brought to sell is destroyed. But then an idea strikes in his mind. He asks his friend to lend him some pans. He chops the vegetables, lights the stove and starts making omelettes. As the smell of omelettes spreads there is a long line of people waiting to eat his omelettes.

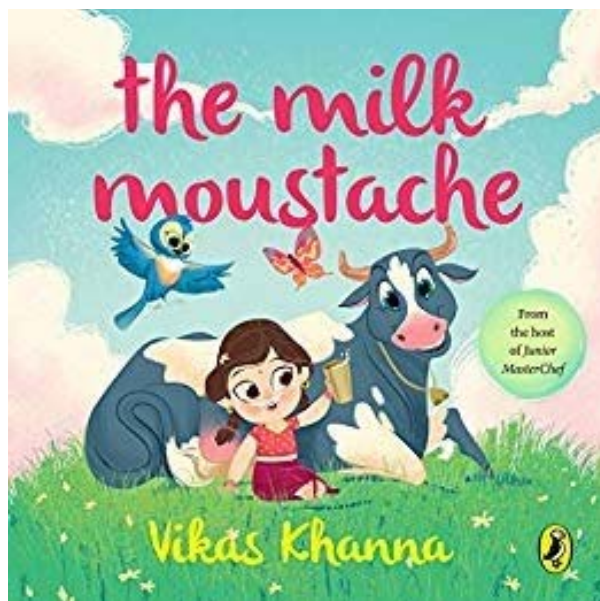


Fig:5

There are picture books based on human-animal bonding and interaction. Vikas Khanna's *The Milk Moustache* (2015, Fig.5) is based on a girl, Jassi who can talk to animals. Her best friend is Kali the cow. One day it so happens that children stop drinking milk and soon the milk strike spreads among children. This makes Kali the cow very sad. Then Jassi comes up with a plan of a milk-drinking race with a “special prize for the child with the longest milk moustache” (Khanna 2015). She sends the invitation and children participate in the competition. When the competition is over children go to Kali with their milk moustache. Kali is delighted to see them and all of them become friends.

Conclusion -

Therefore, we can conclude that picture books are filled with all sorts of themes and concerns from a simple adventure in air to a trip to a temple or sanctuary; from cityscape

to rural landscape; from gender equality to ecological concerns; from human-animal relationship to adult-child relationship. The authors of recent picture books have raised their concern and status from infantile reading to semiotic learning, blending cognitive skill-giving with pleasurable reading and enhanced critical thinking. Thus, picture books should always make the reading experience fun. If a child's experience with reading is a negative one, and looked at as a chore, it may make reading appear to be work rather than fun, which might hinder a child's progress from picture books to chapter books.

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