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Children's Literature in India: An Appreciative Study



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ABSTRACT

Children's literature is specifically written for children. It helps to develop the imagination, creativity and critical ability of the children. They can relate themselves with the characters and it helps them to understand the world better. It also helps to understand the culture and society. Lots of work has been done on children's literature, but this study is particularly focusing upon children's literature in Indian Writing in English which is yet not much explored. Children's literature in India has undergone a great revolution by experimenting Indian style and new genres. They mix up folktales, fairy tales and myths etc.

Key Words: Folktales, Myth, Fairy tales, Children's Literature

Children's literature from the nineteenth century became an equally important vehicle for shaping children's minds, ideas, and cultures in colonial India. The intersection of different literary styles, genres, and writers in periodicals is especially useful for locating the authors' concerns about class, gender, national identity, modernity, and progress. This paper examines how the articulation of different themes in various genres of children's literature was linked to colonial and postcolonial modernity projects by examining the contents of the periodicals.

The problem with Indian children's literature is that mythology and folktales have filled the void left by the absence of original children's literature. Other than the Panchatantra, Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan claims that "imaginative literature intended specifically for children is not part of Indian literary tradition" (101). In fact, the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Panchatantra, Hitopadesha, and Jataka Tales continue to thrive in the Indian market, and as Navin Menon points out, any visit to an Indian bookstore will demonstrate that these works and their retellings have become standard fare (29). Two factors contribute to the problem with Indian English children's literature. The first is, of course, the widespread availability of western children's literature, which serves to both satisfy and eliminate the need for indigenous Indian English children's



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literature. The second, and perhaps more crucial, fact is the issue of language. This topic will be discussed further down, but it is important to note that language is one of the most important means of tracing the development, and possibly stunted growth, of Indian English children's fiction.

In terms of the current state of Indian English children's fiction, the pre-independence period is an initializing period. However, if we consider the concept of positioning the child within the locus of children's literature in India, particularly from the perspectives of the colonizer and the colonized, we can see that the idea of the child performing the nation is embedded in the literature produced during this time period. It is critical to read Supriya Goswami's arguments in *Colonial India in Children's Literature* (2012) in order to verify these facts. "British, Anglo-Indian, and Bengali children's literature of empire celebrate children and their ability to become transformative agents of change," according to Goswami (4). She also claims that in British and Anglo-Indian literature, children serve as agents who confirm the Empire's power in India. Bengali children's literature, on the other hand, positions children as performing agents of change who can effectively subvert the colonizing process, according to Goswami (4). Goswami examines a number of children's books from the time period, including Mary Martha Sherwood's *The History of Little Henry and his Bearer* (1814), Barbara Hofland's *The Captives in India: A Tale* (1834), Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Books* (1894 and 1895), and Sara Duncan's *The Story of Sonny Sahib* (1894), and finds that these texts do indeed place the British or Anglo-Indian child within the early coexistence The colonial enterprise is seen as being constantly threatened by Indian natives in these texts, and the child is placed within the discourse of the natives' colonial liberation mission (9). Dhan Gopal Mukherji was India's first English-language children's author. *Kari the Elephant* (1922), *Jungle, Beasts, and Man* (1923), *Hari, the Jungle Lad* (1924), and *Ghond the Hunter* (1928) are examples of his extensive knowledge of Indian wildlife (Srinivasan 33).

If pre-independence English language children's literature depicted the Empire as an uneasy place to



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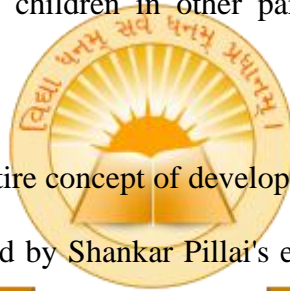
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live, constantly threatened by the natives, the post-independence scenario attempted to subvert that reality with the primary goal of instilling pride and love for the country in the child. The Indian child was the ideal vehicle for instilling Indian nationalism; the nation's promise, as Nehru saw it, could only be realized through the child. The ideology of the fledgling nation is best represented by the children, who are the society's fledglings. Nationalistic tendencies, on the other hand, cannot be realized through borrowed literature. As a result, the following statement encapsulates the problem of children's literature:

There was not enough indigenous literature for children in India apart from the epics and folklore and myths and legends. They were brought up on Western writings. . . . As a result these children were conversant with Western life styles than with the way of life of children in other parts of their own country.

(Shankar 260)



This statement encapsulates the entire concept of developing an effective genre of children's writings in India, which was largely conceptualized by Shankar Pillai's efforts. Shankar's consistent efforts boosted the publishing scene, but it's critical to explain how English children's literature can be contextualized. According to Meena Khorana's detailed analysis of the publishing sector in post-independence India, there were no publishing houses for children's books at the time. After independence, the immediate focus was on the production of text books rather than children's books, so the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) was established in 1961 to publish good and appropriate children's text books (Khorana, Life 94). The irony of children's literature in India is that nationalistic concerns placed a greater emphasis on textbook production than on children's literature per se, and this situation still exists today. Khorana goes on to say that until a proper publishing industry was established, English children's writers were limited to the children's sections of some of the most well-known English-language newspapers. Despite overt nationalistic ideals in relation to children's literature, English language publishing was the first



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to develop (Life 95).

Shankar Pillai founded the Children's Book Trust (CBT) in 1957 with the sole purpose of publishing children's books. The majority of the books published by CBT were written in English and later translated into some of India's major languages. The books were kept inexpensive to appeal to a broad audience, and they were made available in a variety of age groups. CBT's efforts are noteworthy because it was constantly striving to improve itself, which resulted in the encouragement of new writings and writing skills. Arup Dutta's *The Kaziranga Trail* was published in 1979 as a result of CBT's initiative, and it set a precedent for others to follow (Jafa 799). The National Book Trust (NBT) was founded in 1957 on the initiative of then-Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, and began publishing children's books in 1969. The NBT's goal was to publish low-cost books that promoted national integration. Translations of regional books were also promoted as a result of this. In 1985, the "Nehru Bal Pustakalaya" and "Aadan Pradan" series were established to promote Indian authors' literary works in their native tongues. NBT has done outstanding work in publishing translated works, information books, and text books, as well as launching new projects to advance children's literature (Srinivasan 36-37). The Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children (AWIC), founded in 1981, is a registered non-profit organization based in Delhi that represents writers and illustrators for children's books. Its members bring a level of professionalism to the field that has never been seen before. It also publishes *Writers and Illustrators*, a quarterly magazine that features research-based articles and reports from various children's literature seminars and conventions. Indian English Children's Literature did not begin to flourish until the late 1970s. To cater to the comic reading audience, India Book House launched the "Echo" and "Cheetah" series, as well as the very popular *Amar Chitra Katha*. As the demand for retold series waned and the English reading generation yearned for something fresh, a slew of new publishing houses jumped into the fray. Many well-known publishing houses, such as Vikas, Roli Books International, and Thomson Press, began publishing in the late 1970s, and later established publishing



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houses, such as Puffin, Rupa, and Harper Collins, began publishing original works by Indian authors. Macmillan, Orient Longman, and Oxford University Press, among others, have brought Indian editions of foreign publications. In addition to them, local publishing houses such as Katha and Tara are doing a lot of creative work in this area (Srinivasan 42- 44).

The sudden burst of writing also brought to light a slew of issues that had previously gone unnoticed or were not considered worthy of literary treatment. Rushdie is also noteworthy in the context of children's literature, as he dared to address issues that had previously gone unaddressed in this genre. His work adds a level of sophistication and finesse to Indian English children's literature that has never been seen before.



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