

**A STUDY OF IDENTITY, NATION AND CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN INDIA****N. Vasumathy**

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**ABSTRACT**

A nation's literature is traditionally seen as a reflection of the values, tensions, myths and psychology that identify a national character. Countries resemble many things to many people. They are places, nations and communities. They are also ideas that change constantly in the minds of their people and in debates about the past and the future. Benedict Anderson defines nation as 'an imagined community'. He maintains that the members of a nation never know each other, meet or hear each other, yet they still hold in common an image of who they are as a community of individuals.

Keywords: Identity, Nation, Children's Literature

**Introduction**

How is a 'common image' passed on to children (and to people in general) in India? One of the ways in which an image is transmitted to a nation is through literature. Sarah Lorse (1997) writes that national literature are 'consciously constructed pieces of the national culture' and that literature is 'an integral part of the process by which nation-states create themselves and distinguish themselves from other nations'. For young readers, national literatures play a crucial role in developing a sense of identity, a sense of belonging, of knowing who they are. In 1950, Australian author Miles Franklin argued that 'without an indigenous literature people can remain alien in their own soil'. Identity is not just a positive self concept. It is learning your place in the world with both humility and strength. It is, in the

words of Vine Deloria, “accepting the responsibility to be a contributing member of a society”. Children also need to develop a strong identity to withstand the onslaughts of a negative hedonistic and materialistic world, fears engendered by terrorism, gender discrimination, and the pervasive culture of poverty that envelops many reservation and inner cities.

#### Children’s Literature during Ancient India

Like all primeval cultures, India too possesses its wonderful storytelling traditions since time immemorial, thus rendering Indian children’s literature as a distinctive oral as well as written genre. In most Indian families, stories were in fact, ‘just a grandmother away’. The Panchatantra, were stories told by Vishnu Sharma to three young princes as part of their education and teaching upon ‘intelligent living’. The structure of that very children’s literature from India, as the first instance of the original, as ‘frame story’, were in fact, several stories set within. Stories within stories were indeed a fascinating way of telling them to children, as they themselves made good use of this format most naturally in their own aptness of story-telling. The other very enthralling aspect that comes up while tracing the history of the Panchatantra in Children’s literature in India are the umpteen styles of illustration, that accompanied the text – from cave paintings to rock-cut panels, from classical miniatures to Nepali folks. The classical and immortal series of Amar Chitra Katha have been adapted over and over again, each writer and illustrator harnessing inspiration from the original and ameliorating it further with their own style and imagination. Panchatantra under the genre of Children’s literature in India, have wondrously served as platform for inspiring regional as well as English story-tellers.

#### Children’s Literature in Medieval and Modern India

The medieval period for Children's literature in India was also one of experimentation and symbolic representation, with Urdu stalwarts like Amir Khusro or Mirza Ghalib setting the balls rolling for an age of transformation or metamorphosis in illustrative or pictorial literature for children in India, which could vary in senses in the poetic pieces of Islam dominated India. However, all this is a part of a glorious past, remaining there exactly where it had remained, with the current scenario being vastly different. The rich metaphor and imagery, the original approach and sophisticated structure of the oral and written tradition of the yesteryears. Children's literature in India is verily reflected in retellings and adaptations in a rather convoluted and refined manner; many have been competently written, some well-written. But none have indeed 'dared' to capture the spirit of these stories. This is solely because if these stories are rewritten utilising the techniques, forms and structures of the oral or primeval telling, they would upset many of the pre-conceived notions about children's stories. Whatever the factor is presented in the contemporary scenario, ancient Indian Children's literature is perhaps the most heartwarming and enjoyable of the lot, differing vastly from any modern-day format; those stories were much closer to nature, with unshackled and unchained experiences, much like a child's conversations and play. There exists a special category for children's literature in India, pertaining to books written not specifically for children, but which would be relished by them. Here one can find the Panchatantra, The Jataka Tales and many of the popular folk stories and nursery rhymes of the world being grossly incorporated. In fact, the arrival of the Europeans on Indian soil, particularly with the British Empire ruling, literature in India never did abide the same, with English as well as regional children's literature in any given Indian language was being issued with full vigour and mass reception. The works of writers such as Sukumar Ray, Satyajit Ray, Rabindranath Tagore, R.K. Narayan, Ashokamitran, Basheer (in regional

languages), Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Ruskin Bond have swayed the much young reading section, young and old at different levels, in different voices.

### Children's Literature in Contemporary India

The printed Children's literature in India bears a history of barely 150 years. But post Independence, 'juvenile literature' has witnessed a steep growth and development, despite several hurdles. Children's literature in India is slowly, but securely struggling over the high walls of taboo, shaking off the 'dry dust of didacticism'. The existing literature on children and childhood in India has focused either on issues of child labour and state policies, or has left detailed psychoanalytic study of the history of growing up as a child. Of late literary critics and historians have produced important works on children's literature and colonialism, on rearing of sons and the discourse of the "new" family, as well as on socialization and bringing up of the girl child. But unlike the Western historical literature, South Asia still does not have a social or cultural history of national life and identity of self with children as its primary focus. Recent scholars on other parts of Asia, however, have begun to address the issues of childhood from different aspects, starting from "domestic subversions" in colonial east Indies to "passages to modernity" through the day-care movement in Japan. By following upon the existing literature on the periphery of children's literature, now is the need to draw the Children's Literature of India towards representing the nation and children's indigence of developing a strong identity, in order to stagnate the assault of a hostile connoisseur and fiscal world, apprehensions invoked by rebellion, gender discrimination and the blatant dogma of subsistence.

India is often referred to as the cradle of children's literature and rightly so owing to its rich tradition of story-telling and its contribution of the literary gems like the Panchtantra, the Jataka tales, the Hitopadesha, the Puranas and the two epics the Ramayana and the

Mahabharata. The Indian literature for children, like its European counterpart, can be traced back to folktales which were passed on from one generation to the next in the form of oral narratives. The oldest work composed for children in India is the Panchtantra, the legendary tales believed to have been written around the 3rd century BCE by Vishnu Sharma. The tales were originally composed to implant moral values and administrative skills in three wayward princes through a delightful array of stories. Panchtantra or “Five Stories” is an ancient collection of interrelated animal fables in prose and verse arranged within a frame. It illustrates the central Hindu principle of “niti” or the wise conduct of life. The purpose of the tales is to imbibe among the readers the harmonious growth of the various human faculties to derive utmost joy from life. All the tales contained in the Panchtantra are allegorical in nature and motivate the readers to make their life a perfect blend of security, prosperity, resolute action, friendship and good learning. The work is the most translated literary work, in Indian as well as foreign languages. It reached Europe as early as the 11th century and by 1600 BC its translations appeared in Greek, Latin, Spanish, Italian and German. The tales have been rewritten and adapted by a number of authors through centuries and their popularity and influence continues to dominate children’s writing in India and across the world in the modern times. It is difficult to find a continuous and distinct stream of literature written specifically for children in India before the mid nineteenth century. Literature was a shared domain between adults and children. Riddles by Amir Khusro composed in 1383 were enjoyed by children and adults alike. Sakhiyan, a poetic composition by Kabir during the sixteenth century became quite popular among children for its metrical movement, metaphor and alliteration. A definite body of “children’s literature” in India began to develop as late as the nineteenth century and just like the novel and the newspaper, was a British import. Certain factions of Indians who had been exposed to western education took to the idea rather enthusiastically. It was a period in history when India and Britain were directly related, a

period in which the literatures of both the countries were undeniably influenced by each other. The books published in Britain in the nineteenth century invariably mentioned India while on the other hand Indians avidly translated or adapted British stories for children into Indian languages. Aesop's fables, Rudyard Kipling's Jungle Book and Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes were a few popular British books that were translated in Indian languages. The growing concern over the serious development of children's literature in India was the result of India's cultural contact with the western ideas of education. Initially, the educated Indian was content to read about the British culture by way of their books in India but soon a fierce debate raged across India, particularly in Bengal, about creating an appropriate "Indianness" in literature and the need to depart from its European counterpart. The earliest form of writing for children developed in Bengal, perhaps because of their most intimate contact with the British. Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar's primer Barnaparichay intended to teach the alphabet and basic reading and writing skills to children. Rabindranath and Abanindranath Tagore's works drew heavily upon Indian folk tales and legends. Rabindranath Tagore's Shakuntala, Rajkahani and Katha o Kahani are retellings of classic Indian works. He wrote several plays and stories exclusively for the young. Rabindranath's primer Sahaj Path demonstrates a delightful and entertaining way of teaching children the skills of reading and writing. The publishing industry in Bengal was flourishing and it had already begun to acknowledge writing for children as a distinct category. The children's literature scenario in India transformed after independence. The Central and State governments took countrywide initiatives for the development of education and to establish an organized library network across the country. These schemes provided an unprecedented incentive for the children's writers and publishers which led to a large scale production of reading material for children. Though produced in large quantities, most of the books lacked appealing language, imaginative insight and attractive illustrations necessary to capture the

fancy of the young. The publishers hesitated in investing a decent sum of money in the production of children's books as the sale of even the cheapest material was poor.

Literature written for the young in India is an eclectic area of study. India has had a long and illustrious history of producing stories for children, but children's literature had remained a neglected area in terms of publication and academic attention for many years in our country. Children were frequently dismissed as injudicious readers and texts written for them were blatantly ignored for being unscholarly. The twentieth century heralded the dawn of a period which brought value and recognition to literature written for children in India. It witnessed remarkable growth and development despite insurmountable hurdles that had hindered its steady progress. Indian writers for children ventured into previously forbidden domains and expanded the scope of the genre which had hitherto been limited to overtly moral and didactic intentions. Myth, folklore and school boy stories were either given a novel treatment or were done away with in favour of more contemporary concerns like the growth and development of character and personality. Fiction written for children and young adults underwent a meteoric rise in popularity in India in the 1950's at the hands of classic writers like R.K. Narayan, Munshi Premchand, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand. Literature for children stepped out of the shadow of its adult counterpart as it began experimenting with the treatment of issues that were directly related to the children and the formation of their identity. The child became the central concern of the writers. Consequently, the literature written for children no longer served as an instrument for the dissemination of adult values or merely a means of entertainment, but came to acquire an independent existence. The social, economic and intellectual conditions in post independent India were ripe for a shift in perspective on children's literature. It broke away from its largely simple and commonplace connotation and emerged as a genre demanding serious attention, moving from the literary periphery to academic mainstream. How children's literature has created a dialogue between

old and new ways of thinking, sown and nurtured seeds of social change and promoted revolutionary ways of thinking can be aptly understood from the works of representative child fiction writers like Ruskin Bond, R. K. Narayan, Anita Desai and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The books written by these authors speak both to children and adults, though in different voices. The quiet, unassuming manner in which the artists take us through the maze of life by depicting the travails of growing up is a point in comparison between the two male authors and the two female authors. They do not describe life with philosophical depth or try to colour it in profound overtones. They narrate ordinary life-experiences with grace, humour and insight and these experiences in themselves lead to an understanding of the intricacies of human life.

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