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PAIN AND PLEASURE OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN INDIA

Dr. ANSHU KAUSHAL

Assistant Professor of English, Government Degree College, Kandaghat.

Email: anshukshl76@gmail.com



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ABSTRACT

In the modern world, the importance of scientific and technical education is well recognized but a broad or liberal education is also important. This article makes a case for studying Children's Literature as a discipline at the school and college level as it can play a constructive role in furthering the culture and values of the society. It also offers a forum where the society can study its problems and generate solutions at the still nascent stage of childhood and adolescence. Allowing children access to all varieties of literature ensures their development into caring, intelligent and empathetic adults while simultaneously strengthening their cognitive developmental domain. Literature for the young is a potent social, moral, psychological and intellectual tool as it makes them aware of the humanizing effects of exploring a literary work and has an immediate influence on the edification of their imagination. Literature written for children merits serious and sustained attention of the policy makers and should be treated in a worthy manner considering its contribution in the character and personality development of children. It is an ennobling art form and should not be disdained or categorized as inferior simply because it caters for the young. Tracing a brief history of children's literature in India, the article discusses the works of three literary stalwarts- Ruskin Bond, R. K. Narayan and Anita Desai in bringing out the significance of studying worthy literature. Their literary works give young readers a chance to develop emotional intelligence and creativity, hone their social skills, nurture their personality and imbibe enduring human values by presenting before them the consequences of the choices made by their characters. Children's literature is a cultural and artistic product which can be a valuable asset to the construction of their individual identity and true self.

Key words: Children's literature, significance, development, social, moral, intellectual, character, personality, identity

Introduction

Children's literature is marked by an underlying uncertainty as to what actually constitutes the subject. Does the tradition of storytelling in the pre-literate age fall within the purview of children's literature? Does it include folk and fairy tales, myths and legends? Does it refer to books written for children, by children or books written about children? Should these books treat intended child readers or actual child readers? What are genres or formats that children's literature encompasses? What is the age group of its intended readers?

What function is it expected to perform? Kimberley Reynolds brings out the ambiguity of literature written for children in her book *Children's Literature: A Very Short Introduction*. She writes:

"It addresses works that were specifically directed at the young, those that came to be regarded as children's literature by being appropriated by young readers, and those that were once read by children but are now almost exclusively read by scholars....Here it is important to establish that there is no single, coherent, fixed body of work that makes up children's literature, but instead many children's literatures produced at different times in different ways for different purposes by different kinds of people using different formats and media." (2-3)

From the above description it is quite clear that children's literature embodies a vast and varied range of literature. Its material comes from sources like myths, legends, folk tales, fairy tales, ballads and rhymes, adult literature adapted to the reading needs of children or books written specially for children. In the modern times, transliterate embodiments such as e-books and computer games also fall within the realm of literature intended for children. Its addressees range from infants to young adults, that is, children between the ages of zero to eighteen. It may assume different forms like picture books, illustrated books, pop-up books, anthologies, encyclopedias, novels and multimedia texts. Drama, fiction, science fiction, adventure stories, poetry and information books are its popular genres. Texts for children may be written for educating or may be overtly didactic with a defined moral purpose for e.g., information books, story books. Their aim may solely be to amuse and entertain or may be written with the purpose of stimulating the intellect. To restrict the plurality of children's literature to the domain of a definition would imply ignoring some or many aspects of this eclectic discipline.

There has been a constant debate among literary critics as to the existence of something which can exclusively be called a children's book or is the distinction between adult and juvenile fiction a synthetic one created by teachers, parents, librarians or publishers as a mere convention? Myles McDowell in the essay "Fiction for Children and Adults" avers that there are marked differences between the two categories of literature "even if the two merge and run together freely at the point of contact" (Hunt, 2: 54). Books written for children are shorter in length with the presence of child oriented plot and language. The narrative treatment is vigorous and energetic with a greater emphasis on action and dialogue rather than description and thought. The protagonist of a children's book is invariably a child and the plot demands only a passive presence or the complete absence of a parent or a guardian. The plot is conventional and lends a free scope for the element of adventure, fantasy, improbability and magic, always making it possible for a book to have a happy ending.

That brings us to yet another question. Is literature written for children qualitatively different from that written for adults? The apparently simplistic nature of children's texts has hitherto led to its exclusion from the adult literary canon. It was believed that literature for children was intended as a sugar coating around the bitter education pill and no literary quality could be attributed to it. Children's literature remained a separate and marginalized literary entity, having a system of its own and was guided by its own laws for a long period of time. The reasons for debarring this category of literature from the mainstream were varied. It was considered a piece of fantasy because of its close association with fairy tales, folklore, myths and legends, far removed from the real modern world. Simplicity of language in books written for the young was waived by a sleight of hand as being unscholarly. Having naïve and inexperienced protagonists, unworthy either of any extraordinary achievements or psychological analysis made children's literature appear shallow and uninteresting. It is argued that these texts lack in complexity and offer only formulaic language, derivative characters and predictable plots, displaying little or no stylistic experimentation or creative potential as an incentive for a critic to evaluate the literary work. Literature written for children, on the contrary, merits serious and sustained critical attention as a literary form and should be treated in a worthy manner. The study of literature written for the young belies these myths. It makes us aware of the humanizing effects of exploring a literary work and its immediate influence on the edification of our imagination. It is an ennobling art form and should not be disdained or categorized as inferior simply because it caters for the young. Literature written for the young, like all literature, is concerned with human

experience - good and bad, human desires- fulfilled and unfulfilled, and it would be unfair to assume it to be a lesser work of art or not having an integrity of vision simply because it is categorized for a certain age group. Simplicity of plot and language has little to do with the profundity of meaning or gravity of purpose. The *Holy Bible* has drawn the interest of many a reader and critic through centuries and its modest style has very gracefully stood the test of time. Perry Nodelman in his very famous essay "Pleasure and Genre" defends this particular perspective on such texts and writes that a critical discussion of literature written for children reveals that "their apparent simplicity contains depths, often surprisingly pessimistic qualifications of the apparent optimism, dangerously and delightfully counterproductive possibilities that oppose and undermine the apparent messages. These texts can be easily and effortlessly heard and read, but once read, they continue to develop significance, importance, complexity, to echo ever outward and inward; "These are texts that resonate" (Hunt, 2: 384). Salman Rushdie says that out of all his works – including *Midnight's Children*, which won the Best of the Booker – his children's books may last the longest (Web, "Children's Books are Never Just for Children"). Children's books last because they are designed with re- reading in mind. They become part of our emotional autobiographies, something that we associate with our childhood association and memories, so that we feel nostalgic about them and crave to go back to them again and again.

A text which looks towards the young as its readers, faces the challenge of being written in a language "immediate in its simplicity and profound in its ability to call forth meaning" (Harrison 244). Children's laureate Malorie Blackman says, "Call me biased but I find the standard of storytelling in children's books and books for the young adults second to none. I find it telling that even now, there are far more children's books and books for teens that I'd like to re-read than books for adults" (Web, "Children's Books are Never Just for Children"). The methods and approaches employed for studying writing for the young are also the same as those used for adults, though it is more conveniently disposed to some particular approaches than the others. The Australian novelist, Ivan Southall questions the literary denigration of literature written for the young:

"The viewpoint mystifies me- that works for children must necessarily be minor works by minor writers, that deliberately they are generated and projected at reduced voltage, that they evade truth, that they avert passion and sensuality and the subtleties of life and are unworthy of the attention of the serious artist or craftsman...Adult scaling down of the intensity of the child state is a crashing injustice, an outrageous distortion of what childhood is about." (Qtd. in Hunt, 1: 9)

The misreading of children's literature can be partly attributed to the myth regarding childhood; that it is a naïve state of being to be constantly patronized by adults; that since childhood is a state from which all of us grow away, we should also outgrow any kind of interest in such literature. T. S. Eliot once wrote about childhood:

"We can, if we choose to relax to that extent, indulge in the luxury of the reminiscence of childhood; but if we are at all mature or conscious, we refuse to indulge in this weakness to the point of writing or poetizing about it. We know that it is something to be buried and done with, though its corpse will come from time to time to find its way up to the surface." (Qtd. in Reynolds 32)

His comparison of childhood to a corpse may shock our sensibility but his acknowledgement that the corpse keeps resurfacing, affirms the fact that we remain associated with our childhoods no matter how mature we become. Children's books evoke an image of childhood that has the potential of appealing to the adults that we have become. It is a daunting task for the writer to recreate childhood not from as it appears in the present but what it felt like then. In his essay "On Three ways of Writing for Children", C.S. Lewis fiercely condemns the use of the word "adult" as a term of approval and remarks that maturity does not consist in losing childhood but in failing to add it to human experience (Hunt, 1: 17-26).

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 11<sup>th</sup> 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.

A variety of genres like poetry, drama, short stories, travelogues, nature writing, non-fiction, novels and comics were published for children in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Praiseworthy attempts were being made by writers like Dr. Zakir Hussain and Qudsia Zaidi in Urdu, Prem Chand, Safdar Hashmi, Arvind Gupta and Subir Shukla in Hindi, Rabindranath Tagore, Upendrakishore Roychowdhury, Sukaumar Ray, Satyajit Ray, Ashapura Debi and Mahasweta Devi in Bengali, K. P. Kesava Menon, M. T. Vasudevan Nair in Malayalam, T.

P. Kailasam in Kannada and many others but the reading experiences of the young were largely confined to the works of western writers like Enid Blyton, Perry Mason, Agatha Christie and the like. The deplorable truth was that the growth of children's literature in India was slow and there was hardly any sustained effort to innovate and explore in this field. The second half of the twentieth century saw the rise of some iconic publications like the Amar Chitra Katha, Children's Book Trust and the National Book Trust which made significant contributions to the development of children's literature in India. They published socially conscious and didactic literature for children presenting realistic images to the young. Talented writers like Sankara Pillai, Arup Kumar Dutta, Poile Sen Gupta, Paro Anand, Swapna Dutta, Sandhya Rao, Vayu Naidu, Zai Whitaker and Kalpana Swaminathan created children's books with realistic plots and characterization that were enjoyed by children and adults alike. Children's magazines like *Chandamama*, *Tinkle*, *Target* (now defunct), *Children's Digest*, *The Magic Pot* and *Children's World*, to list a few, contributed a great deal towards developing the habit of reading among children. Another category of books were the ones that were not specifically written for children but appealed to their taste. This included European books like J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, Mark Twain's *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *The Three Musketeers* by Alexander Dumas, and popular European folk stories and nursery rhymes. Gradually, the contemporary Indian children were offered a variety of books written by the post independent Indian writers like R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Ruskin Bond, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Paro Anand, Anita Nair, Deepa Agarwal, Ranjit Lal and many others which reflected the dreams, fears, desires and ambitions of their lives more authentically than the European writers. Their writings stood apart from their predecessors as their stories are about the everyday trials and tribulations of ordinary children and tackle themes like poverty, hunger, bullying in school, abuse at home, environmental hazards, drug dealing, death and divorce. A reflection of astute Indianness was palpable in their settings, plots, characterization, language and style of writing which attracted a large number of Indians, both young and adult, reading English Literature. Many of their books and stories made way into the school and college curriculum and continue to be an integral part of the public libraries throughout the country.

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. The aim, therefore, is to examine three writers and their books, R. K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends* (1935) Ruskin Bond's *The Room on the Roof* (1956) and *The Young Vagrants* (1981) later published as *Vagrants in the Valley* (1993) and Anita Desai's *The Village by the Sea* (1982) and analyze how these literary masterpieces educate the young regarding the formation of their individual identities.

The construction of identity has been at the core of literary concern for the simple reason that all literature deals with human nature. How does childhood depicted in children's literature determine and influence identity construction? In a fast and ever changing world, dominated by adults, their sense of right and wrong, a social system where adult values are passed on to children as legitimate, how do the young develop a value system of their own? In a world where long established truths are challenged every moment, a world where everyday living is scathed with violence, uncertainty and struggle, what kind of an individual does one choose to become? Children's literature has often been looked down upon by the academia as being short and simple, not deserving critical attention. This article examines four seminal texts by noted Indian writers in English to bring out the many layered significance of literature written for the young. These texts may apparently be simple but they allow a huge scope for interpretations that may contradict or underestimate evident themes and suggestions. The writers under study offer excellent examples in their works of the joyfulness and misery, fears and fantasies that characterize the unconscious recesses of child psyche. The objective of this article is to explore the depiction of childhood and adolescence in the works of three writers and how tradition and institutions of culture and society have an influence on its child characters. The aim is also to identify adolescence as a threshold of human existence, as being associated with a crisis, a moment when a decision may change a life or indecisiveness may fail to change a life. They offer a perspective where one can step out of the system to create a unique self and pursue an individual dream. The novels set forth fine examples for the young as how to assert one's individuality while simultaneously trying to fit into the socio-economic context.

### **Ruskin Bond and the Self Realizing Adolescent**

As an author, Ruskin Bond needs no introduction. Recognized by the Indian Council for Child Education for his significant contribution to the growth of children's literature in India, Ruskin Bond is one of the most widely read children's authors across the country. The recipient numerous of prestigious national and international awards, Ruskin Bond is an iconic Indian author, children's writer, and novelist.

The appeal of Bond's clear and unassuming writing shows subtle yet steadfast growth through the long span of his writing career. Most of his stories are autobiographical in nature and are culled from personal experiences with people whom he knew well or even briefly met. He can easily delve into his rich experiences, especially those of his childhood and early adulthood for yet another story line or another evocative character. Bond's first novel *The Room on the Roof* which he wrote at the tender age of seventeen is an autobiographical account of the coming of age of a young orphan boy named Rusty. Penned down with immense sensitivity, clarity and psychological insight, the novel won the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize in 1957. Along with the prestigious award, Bond won the honour and acclaim of being a writer who evokes a true picture of the pain and pleasure of childhood in his writings. The writer confesses that he feels inclined to revisit his childhood memories now and then as it is a period of his life that he recalls well and can recapture and recreate vividly in his works. *The Room on the Roof* is a poignant account of a young boy's struggle for seeking his individuality and establishing his distinct identity by stepping out of his oppressive guardian's imposing shadow. *Vagrants in the Valley* picks up from where *The Room on the Roof* leaves and resolves Rusty's problem of discovering himself through his myriad vagrant experiences with his friend Kishen.

Having spent a rather lonely childhood, writing for children helps the author to understand a child better. His first two novels try to explore Rusty's quest for identity, his psychological growth and self-realization through the evocative journey motif. In his fiction Ruskin Bond deals with the issues that are close to the heart of an adolescent. Bond shows special inclination towards depicting children placed in the pristine and salubrious environment of nature and yet constricted by the social codes of exploitation and dividing practices. The novels *The Room on the Roof* and *Vagrants in the Valley* present a realistic account of the adventures of Rusty in search of his identity. His experiences, an account of which is furnished above, enable him to establish contact with the inner core of his being. He can be distinguished as a person who has the courage to be himself and who also exhibits the courage to be in the world. Rusty learns who he is and what he is from the way in which he treated by his external environment and the people who surround him. He develops a positive view of the self in an open environment surrounded with well-meaning people who love, want and accept him for who he is. Rusty develops healthily as an adolescent who is at peace with himself and is not torn by internal strife or conflict. His personality is more unified, concordant and synergic as we see him develop towards self actualization in the two novels. When his own self is wholly integrated, he develops a capacity to blend with the external environment more completely. He experiences a feeling of oneness with his fellows which produces a highly trustworthy and responsible behaviour in Rusty. He shows great respect for the dignity and integrity of the people around him so that causing harm to them means damaging his own self. The greatest achievement of Rusty in understanding his identity is actually a "transcending of itself, a going beyond and above selfhood" (Maslow, *Toward* 105). Rusty becomes consciously aware of his powers, and makes potential use of his latent abilities and capacities. His keener perception of truth and reality enables him to interpret the life situations more intelligently so that he emerges much stronger and more poised to face life. His thoughts and actions are perfectly coordinated which brings about a serenity and sense of sureness in his behaviour. His doubts and suspicions fade away gradually and the decisions that he takes are in keeping with the welfare of others. The warm and friendly behaviour of the people who surround Rusty during his vagrant experiences enable him to lower his defenses, open up to them and develop his intrinsic capabilities simultaneously. He becomes more decisive, single minded and self confident, never doubting his abilities or his self worth. He frees himself of the shackles of others' opinions and as a result rids himself of fears, apprehensions, inhibitions, doubts and controls. By the end of *The Room on the Roof*, he is more spontaneous, expressive, unpretentious, relaxed and unhesitant as compared to the first time that we meet him in the novel. He does not want to escape the life he has made, "the ocean into which he had floundered the night he left his guardian's house" (Bond, *Room* 117) for ocean was life. *Vagrants in the Valley* celebrates Rusty's realization of the self actualizing tendencies and charts the development of his growth more acutely. His personality is governed and determined more by the intrinsic laws of the self than by the laws of the external world, which, paradoxically are in synergy and not contradictory to each other. The recurring themes in these two novels are alienation, journey, adventure, exploration, loneliness, homelessness, vagrancy, human relationships, infatuation, physical attraction, love, friendship, family and parental absence, separation, to sum up, the pain and pleasure of growing up. Bond's democratic outlook on childhood and his keen perception in portraying adolescents in his two novellas under discussion makes them groundbreaking adolescent literary works that can be approached at several levels of experience and meaning.

#### **R. K. Narayan and the Depiction of Inner Conflicts**

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Iyer Narayanswami or R. K. Narayan, is perhaps one of the most entertaining and illustrious writers of Indian English writing in contemporary times. Included among the "Big Three" of Indian English writing (the other two being Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao), R. K. Narayan distinguished himself by earning comparisons with world's greatest writers like William Faulkner, Jane Austen, Somerset Maugham and Anton Chekov. Narayan's prolific work includes an array of literary outpourings like novels, novellas, newspaper columns, essay collections, short stories, retellings of Indian myths and epics. He edited a journal by the name *Indian Thought* which died down after three issues but was later brought back to life as Narayan's book publishing venture. Besides writing exemplary novels, Narayan is also hailed as one of the

greatest short story writers in the world. His stories conjure up realistic images of ordinary people living unpredictable lives as Narayan gently reminds the human race of its failings and weaknesses.

He explored the various landscapes: social, geographical, political and moral, in his novels and established the presence of a kindred spirit dwelling in all human beings, eternal, ever healing and ever renewed. Narayan became the voice of the middle class semi urban India and portrayed the “culturally divided life of a society in transition by, caught between the new values and the old” (Sen 160). He achieved this feat by presenting to the readers, characters caught in the web of life trying to face it, get away from it or surrender to it. In a BBC interview with William Walsh in February 1968, Narayan mentioned, “My main concern is with human character – a central character from whose point of view the whole world is seen, and who tries to get over a difficult situation or succumbs to it or fights in his own setting” (Sen 171).

Narayan’s first novel *Swami and Friends* is a delightful account of a childhood embedded in a network of social relationships. It is an insightful depiction of juvenile incidents and experiences of the ten year old Swaminathan and his friends in the fictional town of Malgudi. Set in pre- independent India, the novel traces the pain and pleasure of growing up in a world full of exciting adventures, challenges, friendship, tears, fears, wonders, innocence and experience. The various childhood experiences like the fear of examination, the oppressive teaching system and the easy camaraderie of young boys described in the novel, carry a universal appeal. Narrated in Narayan’s characteristic ironic style and sprinkled with generous doses of gentle humour, the novel has gracefully withstood the test of time and established itself as a classic. Swaminathan studies in a Christian missionary school and has a bunch of old friends for company. His life takes a turn when Rajam, a symbol of colonial power and domination, enters the school. Swaminathan abandons his old friends to gain favour with Rajam and goes to extraordinary length to appease him. Swami earns the disfavour of his old friends who label him as “Rajam’s Tail”. The novel journeys through disjointed incidents which trace the growth of Swami as a young boy standing on the threshold of adulthood. The novel ends catastrophically for Swami as his idol Rajam despises him for abandoning their team on the day the much prestigious cricket match is to be held with a rival team. Rajam leaves Malgudi without uttering a single word to Swami. Written when Narayan was only 24, the novel is a brilliant psychological treatise on the joys, sorrows, hopes and disappointments that Swami and his friends go through in a context dominated by unequal social relationship. This novella throws light on the psychological frailties of a ten year old boy, Swaminathan, in R. K. Narayan’s *Swami and Friends* who moves from lighthearted boyhood skirmishes towards a life based on serious choices and responsibility. It focuses on the weaknesses in Swami’s character, his sense of self alienation and estrangement, and his inability to resolve his inner conflicts as he steps into the world of young adulthood. The novel portrays Swami’s irreconcilable inner conflicts and his inability to find a viable solution for them, but he does move a step closer to reality. He learns from the reality of his experiences, comprehends them and gains an insight into his life. As Tabish Khair notes, “Narayan’s characters are alienated but they are seldom rootless; and the main protagonists are never left out in a void of meaninglessness. They manage to make some meaning of life” (150). Swami’s realistic portrayal makes him prone to human failings and weaknesses so that he remains incapable of taking his own decisions and of assuming responsibility for the consequences. Swami keeps falling back upon his family or chasing his illusionary relationship with Rajam which proves to be a sham. The truth of character and aliveness of feeling that is required of a healthy relationship is conspicuously missing in his friendship with Rajam. It remains that of parasitic dependence on Swami’s side and that of vicious domination on that of Rajam. There is no joy, satisfaction or understanding between them as it is a conditional relationship not based on *status quo*.

The novel is aptly titled *Swami and Friends* because it is centrally about friendship but its treatment of the theme also suggests the difficulties of finding common ground and sustaining relationship not simply because the boys are at an awkward age, but more specifically because of the inner conflicts to which they are subjected and their coping solutions to counter these conflicts.



### Anita Desai and the Saga of the Indomitable Will

The third author taken up here is better known for the portrayal of the inner world of her adult characters, than as a writer of children's fiction. From a very young age, Desai aspired to be a writer and it was the dream of her life to see her own books on the family's bookshelf. Fondly nicknamed "The Writer" by her parents in childhood, Desai published in a children's magazine for the first time when she was only nine years old. A writer of world renown, Desai began her career as a creative writer with the publication of *Cry, The Peacock* in 1963. She went on to publish more than sixteen novels and novellas which include three books shortlisted for the Booker Prize.

Often ineptly labeled as a writer with feminist concerns, Desai presents characters enmeshed in problems that have a human dimension rather than being gender specific ones. Women of a recognizable type dominated Desai's earlier fiction, but we see a marked departure in *The Clear Light of Day* and her subsequent novels. As a novelist Desai is interested in the "essential human condition" and the place of individuals in it as depicted in her award winning novel for the young, *The Village by the Sea*. It is a story of the courage and resilience of a thirteen year old girl Lila and her twelve year old brother Hari in the face of extreme hardships and a hostile fate. The novel is set in a small fishing village named Thul and describes the agony of a family ensnared by various hardships. As the novel opens, we find Lila and Hari burdened by the responsibility of their family. With a drunkard father and perpetually ailing mother, the task of looking after their two siblings and nursing their mother back to health is voluntarily undertaken by Hari and Lila. They make desperate attempts to keep the family together but things go from bad to worse. Then one day, seeing no other option before him, Hari leaves for Bombay. Gradually things begin to brighten up for the family and the novel ends on a happy note. Based on true facts, Desai through her exceptional story telling skills paints a vivid picture of the life in an Indian village and simultaneously highlights the influence of the big city of Bombay on the lives of the rural folk. The novel is an outstanding achievement as far as character portrayal is concerned and affirms the victory of the indomitable human spirit through its characters. This chapter throws light on the courage and resilience of two child characters in fiction written for children. It marks out the passage of Hari and Lila from an alienated existence into a world where they realize their dreams and desires while conforming to their social institutions and traditional roles therein.

Anita Desai's much acclaimed novel for teenagers *The Village by the Sea*, unlike most of her adult fiction, is a portrayal of stark poverty in post independent rural India. Straddling the rural and urban Indian milieus simultaneously, the novel ventures into the inner sanctums of the family of an Indian fishing community and renders a poignant account of a displaced and dispossessed childhood. The novel is a harrowing depiction of the intimidating experiences that Hari, a twelve year old boy and Lila, his thirteen year old sister undergo to carry out their familial responsibilities. The novel opens amidst serious problems which do not seem to allay through the development of the plot, yet the courage, positivity and resilience of its young, indomitable characters, makes it an inspirational object of study.

Like most children's narratives, the pattern of *The Village by the Sea* is comparable to the monomyth in that the male child protagonist Hari has to depart from his home, cross a threshold, journey into a different world to seek his identity and eventually come home enriched with experience. Hari, much like the mythical hero, has to face many perilous tasks in the quest of identity and ultimately returns to the point of departure, his home, with the promise of a better life. However, a careful analysis of the thematic concerns, patterns of characterization and the authorial presentation of the novel prompt the readers to regard its structure more seriously. An in depth perusal of the novel reveals it to be a low mimetic narrative and offers an insight into the lives of ordinary children which is by no means ordinary. Realistic characters have been a part of children's fiction for long but their existence at the low mimetic level in fiction is a recent development in children's fiction in India. Realism in characterization is the hallmark of contemporary children's writers like Ranjit Lal and Paro Anand, probably owing to major changes in society, rapid urbanization and changes in family structure in the post independent India. The emphasis on character focalization in children's literature allows the writer to portray the world through the eyes of child characters. The *Village by the Sea* places Lila and Hari in a world of social and moral upheaval, struggling with menacing poverty, hunger, illiteracy,

onslaught of industrialization, migration from villages to cities and unstable family conditions. Poised against the backdrop of social turmoil is the personal strife of these young children who are burdened by the needs of their family and expectations of the society at a very tender age. Desai's portrayal of childhood is a critique of an unjust society which exerts unnecessary pressure on its individuals who feel obliged to live up to its expectations and consequently face frustration due to the loss of self. The final positive affirmation of Hari and Lila amidst a hostile and despairing environment is indeed the hallmark of their characterization.

In Desai's own words, her novels "aren't intended as a reflection of Indian society, politics or character – they are private attempts to seize on the raw material of life" (Singh Jai Arjun). Lila and Hari live their lives against all odds and make something worthwhile of it. Desai celebrates the heroic life of these young protagonists as they emerge successful in retaining their individuality and moving toward self realization despite crushing circumstances. Lila and Hari possess a defiant individuality and live in conformity with their own vision of life. *The Village by the Sea* is about two young children and therefore, unlike most of Desai's novels, does not permit the author to delve too deep in the internal world of its characters. Yet, it is Desai's genius which brings to the surface of the text their movement towards growth and development making it a rewarding study of human motivation and growth.

Children's literature is a powerful tool which provides a fertile ground for children to live vicariously through the characters and work out the resolution of real world issues. Ironically, in a that holds the distinction of producing the oldest books for children and also being one of the largest producers of English books in the world, literature for children is limited to school or college academic curricula. Apart from the prescribed books, only those books which enhance a child's factual knowledge or provide heaps of general knowledge and information are thought of as being valuable. There is a stringent need for good literature to be read, understood and analysed by young readers. However, in a world where human values are corroding away, the kind of children we are raising is a question which should concern social, political and intellectual leaders of the present time. The young are in need of stories which reflect their everyday lives and emotions in familiar settings; stories written about characters with whom they can relate their individual lives; stories that shape their attitudes in such a way that they can face the world that they live in. There is no dearth of such fiction in the Indian literary canon and its benefit must percolate down to its readers. The advantages of acquainting young readers with a literature that is eclectic and imaginative, offers a strong voice to adolescent concerns and is informal and less literary can go a long way in building their identity and asserting their individuality. It also offers an excellent preparation ground for flexible knowledge based careers that increasingly dominate the upper tiers of the modern labour force.

### Conclusion

Literature offers a certain breadth of education that perpetuates values which are essential in a rapidly changing world. It provides an intellectual anchor to the young and sustains their hope in eternal human values. As the young step into the antagonistic adult world, their faith in human values and in their own abilities is marred by severe conflicts. It is at such testing time that worthy literature comes to their rescue. Contrary to the common belief, the purpose of children's literature is not to paint a rosy picture of the otherwise hostile world or to only take the young on a fantasy trip. The analysis and findings of the four novels has amply demonstrated that exposing children to literature has countless values. It is one of the earliest ways in which the young ones come across stories. These stories become significant sources of the language, images, attitudes and theories which they require to contemplate experience. Books offer children an opportunity to respond to literature and develop an independent opinion on a certain subject simultaneously encouraging a deeper thought about literature. Children learn to evaluate and analyze literature based on their personal viewpoint and experiences. It offers an interface to children by providing an avenue for students to learn about their own cultural heritage and the cultural heritage of others around them. It helps the children to develop a positive attitude towards their own culture and the culture of other people which is necessary for their personal and social growth. Literature written for children helps the young readers to develop emotional intelligence and promote moral development by offering them many moments of crisis when characters have to make moral choices and reflect on the reasons behind those choices. The

value of literature written for children cannot be undermined as it plays an important part in nurturing and expanding a child's imagination. It also fosters personality and social development among the young by creating lasting impressions on their tender minds. Literature has the ability to cultivate positive personality traits like honesty, truth, kindness, helpfulness etc. and shape the young into caring, friendly, dutiful and responsible citizens. Children's literature teaches the young to have an understanding of the feelings and viewpoints of others. We need to value children's literature because it is a timeless tradition, it grants us the tools to transmit our cultural and literary heritage from one generation to the next. It goes a long way in contributing to the all round development of the individual by contributing to civilizing their life purposes, refining their emotional reactions and enhancing their understanding to their place in the world.

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