I have keyed my review of Vandana Singh’s *Younguncle Comes to Town* on the author’s dedication to the loving memory of her grandparents who taught her “by example the meaning of the Sanskrit Great Saying: ‘Tat Tvam Asi’” (That Thou Art / That You Are). This great saying in the Chandogya Upanishad implies the oneness of reality—oneness of the consciousness of the Paramatma (The Ultimate Being / Brahma / Creator) and the Jivatma (the individual being / creature). Stephen Budiansky questions the western intellectual tradition’s profoundly self-centered definition of consciousness as essentially “anthropocentric.”

In *If A Lion Could Talk: Animal Intelligence and the Evolution of Consciousness* (1998), Budiansky argues that animals share our fundamental capacity for rational choice, sense, reflection, insight and feeling. According to him, the western religious tradition initiated and perpetuated a canonic dualistic stance in consciousness. He states, “Man was instructed by no less an authority than God himself to subdue the Earth, and Judaism’s emphasis on man as an ethical agent, and Christianity’s emphasis on the human soul (not to mention medieval Christianity’s abiding distrust of vestiges of pagan animal worship), drew as sharp a line as one could possibly draw between man and non-man” (xiv). As a result, “We do communicate with animals, but never in a way that permits them to describe their experience of being” (xvi). However, an alternative strand of thinking is found in ancient folk tales of Africa and the North American Indian tribes, ancient eastern myths and fables, and Hindu philosophy.
Children have a great connection with animals, plants, and the mineral world, and their literature manifests the same connection. In the tradition of the ancient myths and folk tales, children’s literature resists and subverts the Judeo-Christian didactics, and an “effort to knock man off his anthropocentric pedestal at the top of creation” (Budiansky xiii) becomes an international quality in literature written for children. Thus, works like *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Charlotte’s Web*, and *The Mouse and His Child* consciously deviate from gazing at reality through purely anthropocentric terms.

*Younguncle Comes to Town* follows this international tradition in children’s literature. Above all else, Younguncle stresses this oneness of being: Tat Tvam Asi. Such works often create a dichotomy between ordinary adults who conceive of the world only in anthropocentric, corrupt, businesslike terms and are, in the words of Singh, “boring and conventional” (13) versus childlike individuals. In *Younguncle Comes to Town*, Younguncle is “a little different from other people” (4) and this excites the children in the novel as well as the child readers. They are different from ordinary adults because they readily accept the beings, often considered as small and insignificant in anthropocentric perception, as equals. Younguncle treats the water buffalo as an equal by giving it “a respectable pat” (7). He likes “to make noises like a monkey” (4-5) and converses “animatedly with the rickshaw man” (6). When the child requests Younguncle to bring a tiger’s tail, he states, “I can’t bring you a tiger’s tail . . . the tiger might object” (88). When he meets the tiger at the forest, he talks politely to the tiger and offers it delicious food (130). Hira the horse also communicates with Bira the cow in delight. These childlike characters defeat the big-adult world, often organizing games to liberate captives. Younguncle, the children, and the monkeys “play the most wonderful game of catch” (71) to defeat the gardener of Paytu Lal who hopes to keep a stolen cow. Younguncle plays a game in order to rescue the young woman in shackles. Ravi and Sarita play a game of words (singing) to defeat Ramu’s plan to dilute the milk with water. In such a world, the monkeys are more clever than men and the tiger is more cultured and civilized than the adults. Ultimately, the ranger has to become the tiger’s cook.

Children’s literature—as well as ancient philosophy, myths and tales—contains a divergent consciousness and acceptance for all beings. Although *Younguncle Comes to Town* gives a stereotypical presentation of India and its complex multicultural contexts to the international audience, the strength of the book lies in its philosophic vision of reality voiced in a children’s story. The experiences narrated authenticate the ideals discussed within a lighthearted tale that celebrates hair-raising adventures and provides hilarious laughter for all readers. Apart from all the frolic and mirth, *Younguncle Comes to Town* to proclaim, “Tat Tvam Asi.”

*Works Cited*

Contextualizing Younguncle Comes to Town by Vandana Singh:

DeAnna Pursai, Literacy Educator, California

International literature plays a critical role in children’s literature. International stories provide a glimpse into a world of potentially different values, norms, and social mores. New students to this country often gravitate to literature about their native land, gleaning pride and authority for a brief moment in contrast to their confusion and chaos within a new cultural and linguistic environment. International children’s literature offers a platform for children and adults alike to discuss potentially polarizing or stereotypical concepts in a safe, informative, and constructive forum. These values of heightened cultural awareness and pride, along with the possibilities of challenging traditional stereotypes, are strongly reinforced in the children’s book Younguncle Comes to Town by Vandana Singh.

Younguncle Comes to Town is a whimsical collection of stories about a young man from India, affectionately named Younguncle, and his adventures while staying at the home of his older brother, his wife, and three children. As a reader who is married to a man from India, I was instantly struck with the uncanny familiarities of this story with the family stories I’ve heard, not only from my husband’s family, but also from many of our friends who are from India. The adventures of a young man who rebels against the conventional societal standards, the distressed sister who is forced into a betrothal with an unseemly husband from a “good” family, the visiting merchants and their questionable business techniques, and the visits to relatives in rural villages seem common threads through many of the lives of persons from India, much like McDonald’s™ and dreading high school are for so many of us brought up in America.

Those readers not familiar with life in India may benefit from some additional information about the rich dichotomies that seem so pervasive, at least to someone who is not originally from this culture but has visited India many times. People in India are unbelievably generous and helpful, just as the rickshaw driver who walked with all of Younguncle’s belongings in the torrential rain. At the same time, one must be very mindful of people who will accept bribes (like the local traffic officer) or mislead you (like the milkman who mixes water in the milk pail when no one is looking). India is such a beautiful, lush country, full of jasmine flowers and beautiful, expansive mango trees, but one can easily focus an eye on a skeletal-thin water buffalo grazing in an overflowing trash bin in the middle of the street, with monkeys scampering in nearby trees. The melodramatic love reinforced in movies is much like the bus driver who yearns to drive fast enough to go back in time to meet the girl he instantly fell in love with when he laid eyes upon her, however, India can often be quite oppressive to its women, arranging marriages between two who reside within a caste and have been perceived to have standing in society. Very little is based on the integrity of the individual.
I would integrate a children’s literature story such as *Younguncle Comes to Town* with middle and high school students who have the maturity to comprehend themes such as arranged marriages and oppressive landlords. Singh’s story could invoke a rich discussion about life in India, including arranged marriages, cultural cuisine, and customs and mores unique to India’s way of life. Additionally, I would use this piece of literature in an English Language Learning setting with older students who have recently arrived from India. It would give them a chance to share some of their experiences through a meaningful piece of literature, and it would also give them an inspiration and purpose to practice their reading skills in English. Read outside of school, *Younguncle Comes to Town* provides a rich experience for parents who grew up in India to read their children stories about growing up in India. It could foster family discussions about how their parents were raised, and what was important to their parents when they were children growing up in India. This selection could be a powerful tool for rich family intergenerational discussions for children whose parents or grandparents were raised in India.

My only ostensible disappointment was that the illustrations seemed to be woefully inadequate depictions of an Indian family. Even though the illustrations portray an element of whimsy similar to the narrative style, both the children and Younguncle look like they are from a quintessential Caucasian family in suburban America. A second reservation I had was the strong demeanor Younguncle took on when he was fooling his sisters-in-law into pretending that he was insane in “Younguncle Saves His Sister from a Terrible Fate.” The mild violence embedded in this adventure made me shy away from reading this chapter to a younger audience. When used in the school setting, literature is problematic.

Curricular pacing in these times of high-stakes testing, at least in my experience as a teacher in California, makes introducing literature that is not research-based or part of the adopted curriculum seem almost impossible. Extracurricular reading during the school day is only supported if the children’s literature has a corresponding software reading comprehension component such as that in the Accelerated Reader program. Testing guides literature in today’s American schools. For better or worse, teachers are being held accountable for their instructional minutes and are expected to introduce materials that fit within the adopted research-based core curricula of ELL, as well as within the larger language arts curricula.

*Younguncle Comes to Town* depicts a bygone time when a young man in India fights society’s conformity and endeavors to find happiness in every opportunity presented to him. As such, Singh’s story gives the reader an enlightened understanding about the day-to-day intricacies of life growing up in India. It helps its readers understand more deeply the beauty of Mother India as they vicariously experience the light-hearted adventures of Younguncle.